Syrian Women and Society

Written by Anas Weppi

Part of a series of research papers entitled
"Syria and its people"

Produced by Sharq
in partnership with
the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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“Syria and its people”

A series of research papers about life in Syria prior to 2011
Produced by Sharq in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

We at Sharq have in recent years interviewed Syrians from diverse socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographic backgrounds about their lives in Syria prior to 2011. Each interview focuses on a specific topic in which the narrator has experience, and all provide detailed personal accounts of life as a Syrian in a particular community and town living under particular pressures and privileges.

Listening to the individual stories, it becomes apparent that certain problems impacted Syrians across the country, regardless of ethnicity, religion, class or location and that these stories, collectively, add insight into the difficulties Syrians faced in the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution.

It would serve the future leaders of Syria, and agencies and organisations concerned with the development of the country post-conflict, to consider the lessons presented through these collective stories and experiences to ensure the development of a peaceful and prosperous society.

This is the motivation behind this book, this collection of studies on six interrelated spheres, each of which was written following a review of over 120 personal stories and a study of existing research. Despite the massive destruction, the country is not going to be built on a blank canvas. Its people and diverse communities carry with them fond memories, valuable experiences and crucial knowledge that if heard, nurtured and shared can provide the foundation needed for rebuilding a strong and inclusive Syria.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in the destruction of much of the country and many aspects of its society, but warm memories and relationships abound. When looking to rebuild, be it physical structures, institutions, programmes or communities, looking to Syria’s past should inform design for the future. It is not enough to only understand the experience of Syrians during the conflict, but also to know about their lives, loves and concerns prior to it.

Peaceful coexistence and post-conflict development require above all else empathy and understanding of the other. Effective and constructive development in our understanding of the causes and impact of different actions, events and environments on individuals and communities pre-conflict is key to our ability to develop approaches that can both help end conflict and build sustainably peaceful communities.

For decades, Syrians were denied the opportunity to honestly and constructively share their experiences, their dreams and their concerns. As such, we must focus on building trust based on a unifying desire to build a harmonious and inclusive society. Such trust can be built through storytelling. The telling of and listening to individual people’s stories of struggle and success, woes and wonders, nurtures connections and helps build stronger communities based on empathy, acceptance and respect.

Reem Maghribi
Managing Director, Sharq.Org

You can read and listen to the interviews referenced in this paper at www.SyrianHistories.org

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Produced by Sharq.Org, 2018

Introduction and Summary

Women's relationships to Syrian society evolve principally within the family. This is the first of overlapping spheres that either benefit or undermine women's advancement and integration in all social domains. When, for instance, the family suppresses women's right to education by imposing early marriage or other social customs, women lose a critical opportunity that would offer a solid grounding, empowerment, and connections to the larger society. With education, work is enhanced through acquired learning and educational values, which later enable women's participation in economic, cultural or political life.

In order to understand all facets of Syrian women's participation in society, it is necessary to explore the roots of their difficulties. It is true that many factors lead to the insufficient contribution of women in development, aside from their status and their position in society. What we want to demonstrate in this study is how the social marginalization of women, both in the family and locally, inevitably leads to the diminishing (or perhaps complete disappearance) of their active presence in broader society.

While acknowledging discrimination and the continued gap between men and women in society, there have been positive achievements for Syrian women. Some pioneering women have emerged from their communities - ones that subject women to significant pressure and discrimination - and have managed to succeed in making essential changes in their own lives as well as in society.

We will address the following:

1. Women's Social and Economic Participation
2. Women's Cultural and Political Participation
3. Models of Dynamic Women
4. Conclusions

This study depends on respected sources (research, books, articles, international organizations) for facts, data, information and statistics; Syrian State documents and texts, such as official laws and reports; and citations from testimonies of Syrian individuals carried out by the NGO SHARQ for a project titled *Syrian Stories*. This project comprises a collection of interviews with over 125 Syrian men and women conducted between 2016 and 2017, and recording more than 150 audio hours on diverse subjects.

SHARQ completed the *Syrian Stories* project with the conviction that individual accounts and experiences should be documented to better understand, develop and consolidate the principles of freedom of expression and pluralism. The importance of these stories and testimonies is augmented when integrated into relevant studies and research.

1. Women's Social and Economic Participation

This subject has four main themes:

a. Early marriage
b. Education and Vocational Training
c. Work and the Model Housewife
d. Gender Equality

a. Early Marriage

Early marriage, or the practice of "marrying off" girls, stems from social values and customs and sometimes also financial conditions. Parents may marry off their daughters at a young age believing that their continuing to live at home carries additional financial burdens. The popular saying goes: 'Your son is yours, and your daughter is not yours.' This adage suggests that investing in daughters does not benefit the parents and it is advisable to spend instead on sons.

Parents in some societies also prefer to marry off girls to relieve themselves of the psychological burden and anxiety imposed by a belief that family honour depends on controlling daughters' sexual behaviour. Many families marry off their daughters at a young age in a bid to keep them virtuous in the spirit of popular sayings such as: 'You who give birth to girls carry trouble until your death' and 'get your daughters engaged before your sons.'[1]

"People around me regard me with pity, and it is common knowledge that my society considers those who pass the age of 20 as spinsters ... girls like me, 33 years old, surrounded by all their cousins who are married with families and children. So everyone who comes to visit wishes for me that I will find a good suiter, or seeks to marry me to one of their acquaintances who wants to get married and start a family, saying I must be married to be virtuous. I am against this idea because I know myself and I know that I do not act outside of moral boundaries. I do not need to marry anyone to supervise me and my actions in order to maintain virtuousness."[2]

According to a survey conducted by the Central Statistics Center and UNICEF in 2006,[3] the marriage rate of minors (under the age of eighteen) in the country was about 18%, and this percentage gradually increased after the crisis to more than 30% in 2015. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Justice in Syria, 10% of the marriages registered in the Sharia courts in Damascus in 2013 included minors, and the percentage was much higher in rural areas further away from the capital. As for marriages contracts not recorded in Shari'a courts, those for minors are at 60%.

Article 16 of the Syrian Personal Status Law promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 59 dated 7-9-1953 defines the age of marriage as 17 years old for a girl and 18-years old for a boy. However, it is permissible for a 15-year old boy to marry a 13-year-old girl if they are physically capable, have a real desire to build a family, and if the judge consents.[4]

The adverse effects of early marriage are not limited to social consequences, but also impact the economic role of women. Young girls married off at an early age are often deprived of the opportunity to complete their education, which would prepare them to contribute to social production in the labour market. This educational loss, in turn, affects the level of income of their families and prevents women's contribution to the overall development of society. Even if women were able to participate in the labour market, their participation would not be useful, as work experience alone does not provide them with the theoretical knowledge and advanced applied skills required in the current labour market, and which they could have received through education in various training centres and institutions. The level of training largely determines the amount of remuneration paid and, therefore, the financial conditions of women's families.[5]

"I was married off when still a child at school. I did not know at the time what marriage was, and unfortunately, my destiny was horrible. I travelled with my husband to Jordan, and I found out that he had another wife and children." [6]

b. Education and Vocational Training

Education is one of the primary indicators of the level of development of women's competences. It enhances self-awareness and an appreciation of the importance of their roles in society. Indeed, education gives women more skills and capacities that contribute to the decision-making roles that affect their futures, as well as a sense of the importance of family planning and home economics. The importance of women's education is central to the development of society as a whole.

In some societies, social customs and traditions dictate that women should devote their lives to caring for their families and children at the expense of completing their studies. Such societies doubt the usefulness of women's educational fulfilment, and women may only have the opportunity to work in specific contexts. Because women do not receive appropriate educational training, these work opportunities fall within limited and traditional domains that do not require mastery or high-precision skill, and do not allow for meaningful spaces of creativity.

"The most difficult thing I have ever lived through was when my father said to me: 'Stay at home with no schooling ... I was still in elementary school, and I had dreams of becoming a flight attendant or a fashion designer and, of course, I could achieve neither." [7]

The lack of attention to women's education and to their ability to acquire sufficient theoretical and technical knowledge, as well as the lack of opportunities to train and equip them with skills that allow them to work competently prevents their advancement. They are largely left incapable of achieving self-determination and formulating individual identities, with diminished access to employment opportunities, and no active participation in overall social development. Education, especially the education of women, is one of the most important factors enabling high levels of human development and the improvement of social welfare.

Some families may not allow their daughters to continue their studies beyond primary or preparatory school. The causes of such a decision may be the lack of higher-level schools in the area of residence, the absence of private schools for girls, or the reluctance of parents to allow their daughters to pursue their education. Sometimes the reasons may be due to the modest economic situation of the girl's family, and a lack of material resources for parents to educate their daughters in schools or universities far from home.[8]

"There is a 3-year age difference between me and my sister, and when we took the baccalaureate exam together, she was very successful, ranking fifth in the county high school. This meant that she could not enter the College of Commerce which takes only accepted the top four. Our father took her instead of me, and registered her at the Open University because he had a low-income and was unable to afford to put both of us through university together."[9]

The dropout rates for girls vary from one community to another, depending on the educational level. In 2006, the dropout rate among female students in primary school in Al-Raqqa was 3.7 percent, while the percentage of dropouts in the same governorate was 1.6 percent. The

percentage of female dropouts in the Idlib governorate was 0%, while the male dropout rate was 1.2%. However, for secondary school students, the percentage of dropouts in the province of Raqqa was 43.5% for boys compared to 52.7% for girls. The percentage was different in Idlib according to education level, whereby the percentage of girls dropping out of secondary school was higher than that of boys at 61.1% and 49.6% respectively.[10] However, the dropout rate was lower at the primary school level, which indicates a desire in some regions to educate daughters - but only to a certain level, and only in literacy.

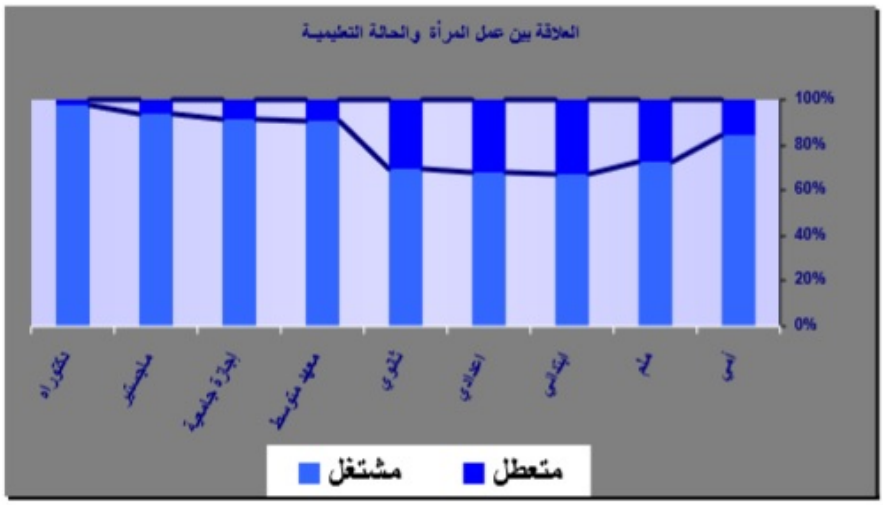
"In the city of Aleppo, attitudes are more sophisticated regarding girls' education. It is a large industrial city with many ethnicities, writers, scientists and so on, so naturally there is a clear orientation towards education. In the countryside, however, there is a belief that girls do not need to be educated, that it is only good for them to cross the line (of literacy), and just barely."[11]

"All the girls were studying without any problem, completing their education and eventually going out and teaching. This was the case in the whole of Hasakah, except for some Arabs who were hardline religious clergymen and took their daughters out of school before sixth grade. I come from a clan, but I live in the city of Hasakah. We adopted all the customs and traditions of urban people and mixed with Christians and Kurds. However, tribal people living in the city still retained the habits of the people of the countryside, and maintained their rural mentalities."[12]

A survey[13] by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2009 showed that illiteracy rates among individuals aged ten years and over amounted to about 9%, while the percentage of illiterate women was about 20%.

A further survey by the centre shows that in 2007, the highest rates of illiteracy were concentrated in the northern governorates (Hasaka, Raqqa, Aleppo, Idlib and Hama). The illiteracy rate among women was 65% as special attention was given to the education of women who, in our societies, are generally more closely aligned to their families than men.[14] The high rate of illiteracy among women leads to ignorance of their rights and duties when it comes to actively participating in the social, economic, political and cultural activities of society. Illiteracy, of course, impedes the integration of women into systems of production.

The following graph shows the relationship between the educational status of women and employment:



We note that except in the case of illiteracy, there is a clear and positive correlation between women's work and their level of education. The higher the level of education, the lower the percentage of unemployment and the higher the proportion of women. The one exception is illiteracy among agricultural workers, whose jobs generally do not require a high level of education.[15]

c. Work and the Model Housewife

As wives and mothers, women in Arab societies, including Syria, are required to perform domestic and household duties. In some communities, the role of women is limited exclusively to family matters and raising and caring for children. The results of a Syrian field study confirms the findings of a National Human Development Report, which indicates that, on average, homemakers perform 8 hours of domestic labour or more per day, equivalent to average working hours in public and private institutions. Traditional culture views women as secondary to men, ignoring their creative capacities, and their ability to participate in overall societal development in Syria. Their work is confined to limited domains and spheres if they work outside of the home.

"In the customs and traditions our Uqaydat tribe, we prefer that women do not work outside the home but stay at home, that is, to serve their husbands more than anything, and to serve the entire household. In the domestic sphere, women are respected within the confines of delineated rules. So one of our norms is that women do not leave the house alone without someone accompanying them, and we do not allow them to travel on their own without a male relative. Most of the time, girls' education is limited to high school diplomas because most women are housewives. They may teach but often in the agency system and, more often than not, they do not hold stable jobs. Those who go to university and study do so with their brothers."[16]

"Most young women who work do not choose to work in legal professions and instead choose employment in the public or private sector. This refusal has to do with the difficulty of the legal profession, and perhaps because society does not trust female lawyers. For instance, as a female lawyer, I cannot go to certain places as easily as men, such as to the police station and prisons. Women are also not able to bribe employees with the same ease as men; there is much corruption, many corrupt employees and judges, and laws that are not respected. People prefer male lawyers for murder and theft cases. Frankly, Syrian society views female lawyers in terms of mere prestige, and rarely do you find a female lawyer functioning independently, working successfully in her own office. A female lawyer in Syria either works with her teacher in a law firm, or is married to a lawyer and works with him only to occupy her time."[17]

The problem is one of transforming the idea that women's roles are limited to the home rather than one of encouraging their education and integration into the labour market. Such transformations require a great deal of effort to change communities' attitudes towards women's work beyond the home and family. Ironically, achieving this in some communities necessitates a change in the attitudes of women themselves regarding their work outside the home. The results of the 2005 Rapid Population Assessment Survey in the Idlib Governorate showed that 33% of couples did not support married women working outside the home, compared to 45% of wives who rejected this. About 29% of young people and 43% of young

women oppose women's work outside of the home. In other words, both married and single women (in the target community) were more opposed to married women working outside the home than married and single young men were.[18] In addition to social views of working women, this rejection may reflect a sense of the considerable domestic responsibilities of women after marriage, which require long hours of labor. While certain amenities facilitated women's entry into the workforce in developed countries, Syria still lacks essential services such as accessible nurseries, food, transport and laundry. These essential amenities and services are necessary to optimize women's performance at work and activities outside the home.[19]

"Women are important in the home, in agriculture, in everything. Of course, they have their rights and duties, and they cultivate, harvest and irrigate the land when their husbands are absent from home. Women are capable of more than just raising children; they can give birth and go directly to the land, leaving their children at the side of a field to continue their work."[20]

"I stopped sewing after marriage. I had one child after another, and when the girls grew up and went to work in the house, I went back to sewing because my husband's financial situation was bad, and I helped him with the expenses. We put our boys and girls in school, and all of this needed money."[21]

A survey conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2009 showed that the total percentage of men in the labour force in urban and rural areas was about 69%, while the corresponding percentage of women was about 14%. It is noteworthy that the total number of women that year was about 49% of the total population of 20,125,000 people.[22] It follows that these women were dependent on men and deprived of economic independence.

Regarding the percentage of workers by occupation and sector, we note that the percentage of men also exceeded the proportion of women in all sectors. The highest percentage of female workers versus employees was in the government sector, where the proportion of male employees was 74% and female employees about 26%. In the private sector, however, it is about 5% for women and 95% for men. See Figure (2).

As for wages and salaries, they converge to a large extent with disparities in favour of men, and this is more apparent in some domains such as agriculture. In 2009, the average monthly wage of female workers in agriculture was about 5,500 Syrian pounds, while for men it was about 8,000 pounds. See Figure 3.

Figure (2)
Distribution of Employed Persons (15 +) According to Profession, Sector and Gender

المجموع Total			مشترك/تعاوني/أهلي/عائلي Collective/ cooperative/Domestic' Family			خاص غير منظم Private Informal			خاص منظم Private Formal			حكومي Governmental			أقسام المهن
المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	
156	156											156	156		غير محدد
82700	6860	75841	341	173	168	8011	158	7852	27243	608	26635	47106	5920	41186	المشرعون وكبار الموظفين والمديرون
591392	264424	326968	1624	557	1067	14204	3353	10851	109520	30489	79431	465644	230025	235619	الإختصاصيون
249804	45984	203820	1331	352	980	17010	1275	15735	74520	7814	66706	156943	36543	120400	الفنيون ومساعدو الإختصاصيين
358683	86528	272155	2500	1098	1401	6301	802	5500	36441	9105	27337	313440	75523	237917	الكتبة
642782	34385	608397	1082		1082	80831	5906	74926	533445	25138	508306	27424	3341	24083	العاملون في مهن الخدمات والبيع في الأسواق والمحلات
558812	76244	482568				261829	66085	195743	292560	9729	283231	4023	429	3593	العاملون في الزراعة وصيد الأسماك
1339406	25454	1313952	847		847	653727	10692	643034	597266	10229	587037	87567	4533	83034	الحرفيون والمهن المرتبطة بهم
562585	11552	551033	1639	193	1446	292377	964	291413	152159	5219	146939	116410	5176	111234	مشغلو المصانع والآلات وعمال التجميع
612910	73590	539320	786		786	294160	51086	243074	94028	6167	87861	223936	16337	207598	العاملون في المهن الأولية
4999230	625177	4374053	10150	2372	7777	1628449	140321	1488128	1917382	104499	1813483	1442649	377985	1064664	المجموع

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Figure (3)
Average monthly wage (15 years and over) divided according to economic activity and gender / 2009

Average monthly salary		متوسط الأجر الشهري	النشاط الإقتصادي
المجموع Total	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	
7531	5494	7956	زراعة وحراجة
10939	10019	11008	صناعة
9753	10824	9739	بناء وتشييد
9968	8867	10043	تجارة الفنادق والمطاعم
11897	11975	11892	نقل مواصلات
14037	12621	14654	مال وتأمين وعقارات
12415	12803	12251	خدمات
11096	11779	10967	المجموع

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d. Gender Equality

There has been an attempt to redress the situation of women by creating and promoting equality via the Syrian Constitution and local laws applicable to Syrian women. Article 45 of the Constitution states that women should be free and afforded all opportunities, and that all obstacles to their participation in economic, social and cultural development must be removed. The ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2002 was an essential step in Syria's

implementation of the Beijing resolutions and the special session of the Assembly.[25] However, Syria has reservations about some of the articles of the Convention. Some consider that any reservation with regards to CEDAW is, in itself, discrimination against women, and that every Arab country (including Syria) that has expressed reservations about Article II of the Convention is a non-signatory to its spirit and significance. The second article upholds the principle of equality between men and women in national constitutions, legislation and laws, and confirms legal protection against any act of discrimination by an organization, institution or person, and otherwise requires a change in laws, regulations and customs accordingly.[26] The Syrian law of nationality, for example, clearly discriminates against women as it denies them equality in the right to give Syrian nationality to their children or husbands.[27]

In some communities, traditional culture pressures women and discriminates against them, and the severity and scale of this discrimination varies from one community to another. Customs and traditions, especially in the countryside, can override the law and even religion, as in the case of women who are deprived of their share of inheritance, or forced to submit to marriage without their consent.

"The laws of our clan in the countryside of Hasakah do not allow women to own land or inherit. If, for instance, a father dies and he has only daughters, there are those who refuse to grant his daughters any inheritance. Women are the ones who do not get their share. If a woman marries under the age of twenty and her husband is a relative and they own land, the wife either gives up her share or the husband buys it after calculating the total amount of land."[28]

Discrimination may encompass all aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life. The practice of this discrimination may begin early in life within the family. The family treats boys and girls in very different and discriminatory ways.

"According to our religion, women should have the opportunity to study but in limited domains. We allow women to study medicine in the domain of women's healthcare, for example, or in the teacher training institute to work in our region. We do not allow them, however, to go teach in remote areas or wherever they want, like men, who are allowed to go to Russia or the Gulf and to work in any profession, wherever they choose."[29]

"How is a 17-year-old girl to rent a shop or work alone with one of them? Our social sphere is narrow and closed, and I always had to have a man, like my brothers or my father, accompany me or, at the least, my mother had to stay by my side to prevent my solitary presence in a male society." [30]

Different aspects of discrimination may vary from one community to another, and sometimes from one family to another. This is due to the diversity of cultures, customs and traditions. The phenomenon of discrimination continues to extend beyond the family to society as a whole.

"I am the oldest of my sisters, and I have a sister who is one year younger than me. I reached ninth grade at school and then I was married under pressure. We are three girls, and you know the mentality of the villagers! Girls and their movements and behaviour are under constant scrutiny with no regard to the context of their behaviour. Young men in our community are not subjected to such harassment. These things that I am speaking about were among the reasons for our leaving the village so that we would be relieved of such social pressure

whereby my (paternal) cousin can intervene our lives, and even our neighbours can intervene. The marriage of my sister resulted from the intervention of our neighbours and their pressure on my mother! Had we been young men, we would not have been subjected to this treatment, and we would have found jobs in the village or the same city without having to move from Sweida to Damascus."[31]

"I married and went to live in my husband's village in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. It was a beautiful village, but the habits of its people were terrible and their treatment of women even worse. The birth of a girl is considered a disaster and a cause for family mourning, whereas, on the birth of a boy, people distribute sweets and throw parties as if it were liberation day! People pay no attention to girls' education and it is enough for girls to learn to read and write! They consider it futile for girls to continue their studies as in the end they will be confined to their husbands' houses."[32]

Figure (4)

أنثى	ذكر	الموضوع
49	51	السكان (%)
72.1	70.5	معدل العمر عند الولادة
26.1	12.1	معدل الأمية (15 سنة فأكثر %)
% 7	% 93	المشاركة في مجلس الوزراء
% 12	% 88	المشاركة في مجلس الشعب
17.8	82.2	المشاركة في المهن الإدارية والتنظيمية %
41.1	58.9	المشاركة في المهن الفنية والمهنية %
12	88	القضاة (%)
60	40	المعلمون (%)
5	95	حيازة الأرض (%)
20.327 % 55	16.726 % 45	المستفيدون من القروض الأسرية من 1/ 4/ 2002 حتى نهاية 31/ 12/ 2004 (هيئة مكافحة البطالة)
2.463 % 16	13.377 % 84	المستفيدون من القروض الصغيرة من 1/ 4/ 2002 حتى نهاية 31/ 12/ 2004 (هيئة مكافحة البطالة)

[33]

The statistics in Figure 4 show the scale of discrimination between men and women, including the low participation of women in the People's Assembly and the judiciary, and high illiteracy rates among women.

A survey shows that the most critical determinants and limitations of women's access to education and employment opportunities are related to the impact of gender discrimination on women's awareness, their self-deception by patriarchal structures." In the subordination of women to male-dominant structures, 83% of the responses of uneducated women or those with only low-level education cite family pressure as the reason they do not continue their studies.[34]

Providing equal access for men and women to education, health care, decent work, and equal representation in political, economic and decision-making processes enables sustainable economies. The benefits of such equality will be reflected in all communities. Equality will

reduce poverty and promote prosperity and achieve higher qualitative returns than any other investment.[35]

2. Women's Political and Cultural Participation

This section addresses two main themes:

a. Women in Positions of Responsibility and Decision-making
b. Women and Civic and Cultural Work

a. Women in Positions of Responsibility and Decision-making

Women's exclusion from participation in decision-making and the marginalization of women commence in the first social sphere, that of the family, particularly if the family adheres to the values and traditions that advocate male dominance. Families, in this case, deny girls the right to express their opinions, subject them to many controls regarding clothing and marriage, and often restrict them to marrying paternal first-cousins, and so on.

"In Raqqa, many things hinder women's advancement, such as Bedouin marriage customs. If a young man wants to marry, he also marries off his sister to the brother of his bride. That is to say that the two men exchange sisters to get married. Also, harmful practices derive from the general control men have over women. A brother can control his sister, and she must rush to him as soon as he enters the house, bringing him water and unloading a sheep from his shoulders, and in fact, she must do the same for her father, husband and all males. There is a preference for men over women in our country."[36]

The factors that empower or impede women are interrelated. Educated women who work are more independent and participate more in decision-making within the family than uneducated women. A field study on the relationship between women's work and education and decision-making within the family in Damascus and its countryside demonstrates how traditional gender relationships within the family are evolving towards greater female participation.

The results of the research show that women's participation in decision-making is determined, to a certain extent, by their economic independence.[37] The study also shows that the education of women is one of the most significant factors that determines the relative distribution of power within the family. These results support the need to empower women and engage them in economically viable work. Whatever the arguments, women cannot enjoy full human rights if they remain dependent on others for their implementation.

Social Constraints that Impede Women's Political Participation:

Cultural heritage

The dominant social culture, especially among the lower classes, weighs heavily on both men and women. Men take the role of guardians of women and exercise authority over them. The historical division of gender roles defines the role of women in the family to include her reproductive role, and responsibility for family care. In contrast, male domains include

politics, transformation and productivity, leaving the full burden of domestic and family care on women.

- The authority of social heritage and the patriarchal system define prevailing societal norms and traditions. These norms perpetuate and promote discrimination and violence against women as well as protect and impose traditional gender roles.

Shortcomings:

The independence of women and their permanent subordination to men increases the difficulty of independent participation and representation.

- The deficient legal framework for women's independence permits their ongoing subordination to men, which renders any independent participation and representation more difficult.[38]

- Combining work outside the home and domestic labour exhausts women (and this is a double burden, mainly since the burden of reproduction lies entirely on women), and prevents them from taking opportunities to participate in public life.

Given some statistics on Syrian women's access to decision-making positions, we note that the results are lacking. The first problem concerns statistics. In terms of party activity, we note that 99% of women participating in politics in Syria adhere to the political affiliations of their fathers, brothers or husbands. (This does not include the Ba'ath Party, to which, during this study, all Syrians automatically belong.) It is almost impossible to meet a woman in Syria who is married to a man of a different political affiliation.[39]

At the governmental level, women's presence at the head of ministries constitutes only 10%. Women are usually assigned to traditional ministerial portfolios (culture, education, tourism, social affairs), and for housing and the economy women took top positions only a few times. As for the People's Assembly, the representation of women is only 12% (a ratio that is almost constant within successive legislative roles), 18% in the judiciary, and 30% in the diplomatic corps (and it is a much smaller percentage if we consider their presence in senior positions). In addition, women's presence did not reach more than 10% in the political offices of the parties or branch leaders (the Ba'ath Party's national leadership did not figure until 2005), and the People's Assembly was headed by a woman, who had served for years as a political and media adviser to the presidency, only once in 2016, for one year only.

The second problem with women's representation in decision-making positions is that their presence has remained "static representation" for years (especially in the People's Assembly), and these positions do not result in the championing of women's issue or in any progress in this field.[40]

Professor Mia Al-Rahbi states in an article published in *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamadin*:[41] "The Syrian constitution guarantees women the freedom to vote and to be nominated, to enjoy rights as full citizens, and encourages their participation in social, economic and political life. However, what prevents the application of this law on the ground are the exceptional provisions that take primacy and cancel all else. Also, the Power of the Constitution is limited by the Personal Status Law. This law treats women as unqualified, and grants husbands the

right to prevent their wives from exercising their full role in terms of political participation. A minister, for example, may prevent his minister wife from travel and the right to represent her country abroad. Women's actual role in politics depends on lifting such legalized social constraints, making room for opposing views, permitting the active role of associations, parties and all institutions of civil society, allowing the freedom of expression, and abolishing the control of the security services - which are entitled to repress, with impunity, the security and dignity of citizens and citizenship."

b. Women's Involvement in Civil and Cultural Work

Women are often prevented by parents or husbands from engaging in social activities, or even enjoying any cultural, social or recreational activity. Achieving genuine participation in these areas remains difficult as society does not readily accept the involvement of women. There are a variety of reasons for this relating to social, cultural and political constraints.

Women's participation in civil work depends on:

- Their educational level: there is a positive correlation between the level of women's participation in civil society organizations and academic achievement. The higher the level of education, the greater their chances of participation.

- Social and geographical factors: there is a positive relationship between the level of women's participation in civil society organizations and their geographical position. The results of the field survey indicate a low level of participation of women from rural areas compared to urban contexts because of social conditions, customs and traditions that weigh heavily on women in rural environments.

- The political factor: Participation in the institutions governing civil society depends on the level of freedom and political openness of the country, and the authorization of civil society organizations within the state. Participation requires a margin of free expression, and ensures internal security and personal safety, which serve as an incentive to improve women's conditions.[42]

General Women's Union:

The General Women's Union was established in 1967. Its objectives are primarily to "organize women's energies and unite their struggle to achieve the objectives of the Ba'ath Socialist Party and the Revolution in building a unified socialist society" (Goal 1 of the Women's Union Law and its Bylaws). The Union's role lies in "uniting the efforts of women to remove all social, legal, and cultural barriers that prevent their development and their effective and full participation in the building of society" (Goal 3).

So reads the presentation of goals that, as in all enlightenment movements, especially the progressive ones, espouses the ideals of women's emancipation. This stance is motivated by a belief that the right of all to freedom and a decent life is a goal of human civilization in its own right, but only to mobilize efforts to strengthen a particular political order.

Regardless of such theoretical ideas, on a practical level, this organization has failed to perform its role and has become an organization in form alone, like the Syrian professional unions, which have no power. They have no right to object to a matter decided by the regime that is contrary to the interests of its members, and these organizations must defend the regime's decisions regardless.[43]

This subsidiary institution of the ruling party of the state and society, which enjoys special funding, powers and offices throughout the country, has carried out activities that are anti-female through the efforts of peasants, women and working-class cadres serving the ruling party. Most Syrian women have fallen out of the labour force. Literacy courses are the most prominent activity, and at these women receive sacks of tea, sugar or dates and devote themselves to being "housewives", focusing on knitting and embroidery, keeping vegetables and fruits, or drawing on silk. Their culture is limited to birth control and reproductive health, and to partaking in a weak service union lacking any demands.[44]

"I followed an initial sewing course at the Women's Union and everyone was impressed with my achievements. I was 25-years old and had four children so I attended the main course and obtained an excellent sewing teacher's certificate. We had exhibitions for our work at the end of the course, the girls and I, to show our tablecloths, clothes and so on. A delegation from the Women's Union in Damascus visited and photographed the exhibition and it was very nice."[45]

The Women's Union has only limited achievements, such as obligating laboratories and institutions to establish nurseries for the children of female workers, holding literacy courses and teaching handicrafts, most of which are just fronts and useless. This Union instead did its utmost to prevent and restrict any public activity that could support women's issues. It named itself guardian by virtue of the powers vested in it by the ruling party. The Union is charged to "outline the policies of existing women's associations and direct their activities and development following the objectives of the Union Women's Activities within the organization" (Goal 11). As a result, the women's associations that existed at the time suffered restrictions, and the Union helped prevent the formation of any new women's associations or any gathering demanding women's rights. Thus, the Women's Union did not fulfil the role of advancing or representing women or demanding their rights. The Personal Status Law was unjust to women, except for a minor change in 1975 that raised the age at which a child could be awarded to a mother's custody, followed by a second raise in age, and other minor changes that were not respected.

Even the General Union of Women itself experienced constraints in carrying out its work, most notably its dual legal status. Administratively, it is at once a non-governmental organization and an arm of a ruling political party. The trustees of the party's leaders imposed this contradiction, demonstrating a misunderstanding of the nature of the work and the requirements of the Women's Organization, and effectively drowning it in bureaucratic process (with very few exceptions). Furthermore, the criteria for selecting the organization's leaders was loyalty to the trustees and compliance with their instructions. As such, this official body could not make a qualitative difference to the conditions of Syrian women after decades of serving as the dominating women's organization.[46]

"A passion for freedom led us to organize a women's group inspired by feminist discourse, but we defined it in terms of literary women's discourse so that we would not have a problem with the security institutions. We met each time at a different member's house until we were found out by security and called in for interrogation. I remember the general who interrogated

us said, ‘What do you want?' I said, ‘We just wish to work to achieve women's rights.' And he responded: ‘Who said that women are not given their rights! In the Ba’athist state, women are given their rights and more. If you wish, there are organizations tied to the Ba’ath Party that work on women's rights.' I remember that was the last time we met without facing trouble from the security forces. They rejected any movement outside of party institutions, and we as women and employees, could not violate their orders."[47]

Half a century later in 2017, the Women's Union was dissolved by a legislative decree issued by President Bashar al-Assad, under the shadow of ambiguity regarding the motives behind this resolution. In the articles of this decree were guidelines to appoint male and female employees to fill apparent vacancies in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, thus replacing the Women's Union and all its rights and obligations.

Women’s Associations

One of the predicaments of the monopoly of the General Women’s Union was women’s own role in preventing the emergence of women’s civil society organizations. Despite this, some women’s organizations were able to continue their work, albeit outside of legal frameworks. They benefited greatly from this space of autonomy, of not needing to work under the supervision of the relevant ministries. They benefited, too, from the significant opportunities afforded by international organizations, and managed to develop the capacities of their members. Although not licensed, these civil women’s organizations were able to undertake numerous campaigns to amend discriminatory laws against women. However, the same problem of licensing limited the size and power of these organizations, their access to larger organizations, as well as the possibility of influencing Syrian women in larger segments of society. International organizations represent these unlicensed organizations and their programs in a way that is disproportionate to their actual size on the ground and the number of their constituencies.[48]

There follows a list of some of the women's associations interested in ameliorating the conditions of Syrian women. Surveys and studies intending to help advance women’s status and increase their empowerment in society emerged from associations already active before 2011:

- The General Women's Union

- The Syrian Women's Association: established in 1948, this association continues to operate within the confines of available resources. It focuses on the participation of women in politics and conducts studies on the subject, including one on obstacles to women's participation in politics over past decades.

- The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs: established by Law No.42 of 2003, this commission is directly linked to the Prime Minister. Financial and governmental support enabled the successful completion of studies, surveys and seminars.

- Mawred Foundation: a non-governmental organization established in 2003 with the support and patronage of the wife of the President of the Republic, Ms. Asma Al-Assad. It aims to activate the participation of Syrian women in socio-economic development, representing Syrian businesswomen who work in Syria and abroad.

- The Business Women's Committee: formed in the Chambers of Industry and Trade in the Syrian governorates, it aims to serve business women who constitute 10% of all Syrian business people.

- The Social Initiative Society: obtaining a work permit in 2004 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, it organized some seminars before the authorities banned it and revoked its license due to its discussion of Syrian personal status laws.

- The Association Against Violence Against Women: founded in 2001, it has not obtained a license and is interested in combating all forms of violence against women and protecting female victims of violence.

- Syrian Association for Blind Women (Harmony): founded in 2007 when it was licensed, the focus is on improving the social, cultural, professional and economic conditions of blind women and girls.

- A website on women's issues in Syria: this site focuses on the rights and cultural issues of Syrian women. It benefits from the absence of laws governing online publishing, and potentially draws a considerable following.

There is also a group of charities, which still operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, that aim to care for girls, orphans and others. These charities benefit from financial support provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs, private donations and foreign aid.

- For many years, there has been a lack of communication between the women's movement and the population of Syrian women it represents because of the work methods employed by some of these associations. Political authorities also restrain these associations, defining what can and cannot be done. Work in this movement, as in other government departments, is bureaucratic, distant from the people, and involves little more than bringing recommendations and notes to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.

- What women share with the rest of Syrian society is the lack of a legal framework that allows the formation of associations. This absence forms a significant obstacle to women's participation in the public interest through their involvement in these associations, in feminism, and in women's issues. Their role remains weak in providing female cadres qualified to take decision-making positions, and they lack the mechanisms of pressure necessary to meet the minimum demands of women.[49]

"At the time of unification with Egypt in 1958, all the associations and parties, including the Syrian Women's Association, were dissolved. In 2000 we started to restore the association's license and the matter reached the Office of the President but things got bogged down and we could not obtain a license. Only the other associations and organizations did not have licenses."[50]

"We contributed to the formation of 16 civic associations in Damascus, none of which received a permit, and we worked for a time until security came and silenced us. In 2002, we contributed to the formation of the Syrian Human Rights Association. We were 49 people, and we held a public meeting and elections. Many members were in the prison association."[51]

The limitations and weakness of women's organizations have produced an enormous vacuum in which women's groups of a religious nature, such as the Qabsiyats, have gained dominance in the public sphere and function under semi-official patronage and support. The danger is that not only can these movements further legitimate traditional culture regarding the status of women and their roles, but that any attempt to break out of this would provoke an appeal to the "sacred." This imposition sustains the Ministry of Awqaf's dominance, granting it the final say in this area, and appropriates the possibility of mobility outside of decrees and religious frameworks, and in stark contrast with the character of the secular state.[52]

"There was competition. So, for example, the religious groups were trying to gain dominance, and our perspective in the association was entirely opposing. In religious matters there is much repression - wearing the hijab and imposing the hijab - which contradicts our approach. We encounter many women asking us about religiosity, as if religion is in form and not in practice, acts, relationships and in dealing with others!" [53]

b. Models of Dynamic Women

The traditional work of most Syrian women was confined to the home, and in the countryside, women worked in agriculture and livestock, as well as domestic labor. They continued to work in agriculture alongside men but the land was no longer a sufficient source of family support, with limited space and small plots, drought, and desertification. From the late 1970s, these difficulties prompted many rural young people to migrate to major cities, including Damascus and its suburbs, in search of new jobs.

"From the beginning of the agricultural and livestock market, the prices began to rise; water dried up and people began to travel in search of work. Some had no land at all."[54]

With the rising cost of living and advancements in levels of women's education, many women are now participating actively in the general development of society.

"In the city of Mayadin, the educational levels among women were low; they did not continue their education beyond primary school, and girls married at the age of 13 or 14. As the years have passed, we have seen a qualitative leap for girls at the educational level; families are educating their daughters more often and enrolling them in universities, so we have female pharmacists doctors, and teachers at all levels."[55]

"I was in third grade, and my physical health started to deteriorate. My father was old, and my brothers and I were students. I left school and worked in my uncle's shops despite the opposition of my father and mother who wanted me to pursue my education. I grew older and was sick and in need of money. My sister is a university student, and my younger brother is a middle school student. So I decided to leave school and take responsibility for the family. Sometimes I surpassed them." [56]

It is true that our society maintains patriarchal norms, both in Syria and in the Arab region. However, this male-dominant order and practice varies from region to region, and perhaps between families in the same area, according to differences in inherited culture as well as educational achievement, customs, religion and so on. It is also true that some women seem

to be made to achieve their ambitions and actively participate, even in societies that do not accept this.

"Yarmouk camp is in a poor area, and the idea of two girls opening a pharmacy was not easily accepted. We were subjected to much harassment, especially by unemployed young people, but what allowed us to continue was the ethical and persuasive methods we adopted in dealing with this opposition. My family was happy with my work but, of course, it did not happen without the questioning of neighbours and relatives concerning the family's acceptance of this type of work and their fears about the harassment I could face."[57]

"I decided to open a beauty salon, and I looked for a shop that I rented with the help of my father. I had difficulties dealing with the man from whom I rented this space. In our society, it is difficult to accept a girl working alone. Many factors motivated me to establish myself, so I curtailed my studies and started working in the field of beauty. I chose this field myself, studied it and was passionate about it, and I excelled. My first salon was in the area of Karam al-Shami in the city of Homs, and from there I moved to Al-Haj Atef Square, and then to a more elegant area where I opened a bigger salon. This professional advancement led me to challenge society and seek stability and a sense of self-sufficiency - proof of my existence. The community around me oppressed all women so I did not feel specially oppressed but I did always feel that I was different. When oppression is against an entire group, this does not generate an individual feeling of injustice."[58]

Finally, despite the persistence of the gender gap and discrimination, there are positive achievements for Syrian women. Pioneering women have emerged from communities that have long been subjected to pressure and discrimination, and yet they have been able to make their mark in the most important domains. Syrian women are currently represented in decision-making positions in the fields of politics, economics, society, culture and health; they are represented in education, labour and comprehensive development, including the right to hold senior positions and to vote and run for legislative, municipal, trade union and professional councils. The first female cabinet minister was appointed in 1976 as Minister of Culture. Since then, Syrian women have taken on several government portfolios, such as higher education, social affairs, labour and expatriates. The number of female deputy ministers has risen and women have taken over positions in public administration, university colleges, the diplomatic corps, local administration, municipal councils, the judiciary, law firms and so on.[59]

"I returned from France to Syria, and I started work to create a daily guide to cultural events. It was hard. When I told my Syrian friends about my work, they said I was dreaming, and warned me of the challenges I would face given that the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Social Affairs were the most difficult ministries to attain. They seemed more like a front. If I could override them, I would be able to carry out my project. I was stunned at how impossible this seemed with all the bureaucratic red tape and necessary security approvals. However, I finally made it and in my work during the five years before 2011 I was very successful as an active citizen in culture and society. I saw to what extent cultural production in Syria was detached from the people, and I know how much injustice we suffer in Syria. The official domain of culture is elitist and does not reach people, not because they do not care but because over the years they have been robbed of any interest due to the difficulty of simply living.[60]

Conclusion

The struggles of activists continue in order to achieve the full rights of Syrian women, to galvanize their pioneering roles, and to attain equality in all domains. The first obstacle to achieving these goals is the cultural and popular heritage of patriarchy, which sometimes deprives women of their most basic rights, whether in education, work or even in their choice of partner. Through this research and the testimonies of Syrian citizens, we conclude that:

- Masculine attitudes still dominate Syrian society as a whole and vary from one region to another according to population and the level of parochialism and education in different contexts. In general, such attitudes are in progressive decline in favour of openness and belief in the importance of women's emancipation and participation. There is also an awareness that these ideas are shared by both women and men in some societies, whereby the perspicacity of women themselves reduces gender discrimination.

- Syrian women cannot be treated monolithically as equally suffering from marginalization and exclusion. Each region has specific characteristics according to conditions of development, social and religious traditions and cultural diversity.

- The suffering of rural women is more evident than that of urban women, and in marginalized areas compared to urban areas, especially in large cities. This discrepancy demands that greater focus and priority are given where most needed.

- Some exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards women derive from ignorance of religion or morals, especially among clans. The role of religious institutions or those involved in changing hardline ideology towards women is a crucial one.

- Essential services and support for women's work inside and outside the home fail to alleviate their double-burden.

- Women’s work is stereotyped and relegated to specific areas, even in the most liberal societies that ostensibly have no explicit problem with educated, working women.

- As documented in the interviews of the oral history archive used in this study, most women’s achievements are motivated by willpower and perseverance to free themselves from the constraints of local communities and social stereotypes. In many cases, the support of the family is important in this resistance to dominant social gender structures.

- Women in decision-making positions usually fall into “static representation” roles. In other words, their gender generally is not allowed to influence their positions, nor does their position allow the emergence of, or essential focus on, women's issues.

- There is a total lack of a legal framework that would allow the formation of women's associations, ensure the facility and accessibility of work, or the possibility to influence large segments of society. Potential organizers face severe government restrictions or the banning of existing organizations and associations operating without a permit.

Last but not least, the first pillar of promoting women's roles is to combine efforts for social change at the grassroots level, to facilitate women’s achievements and broader development goals.

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