Four years in crisis:

Women's participation in northwestern Syria

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CONTENTS

Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
LC	Local Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

From December 2014 to April 2015, ARK conducted research on women's participation in local social, political, and economic life in opposition-held, rural areas of northwestern Syria. This report presents the results of that research, describing how social norms, traditions, and beliefs in these communities are being expressed in and transformed by a context of armed conflict to affect patterns of women's participation. Through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and other forms of qualitative research both inside and outside Syria, ARK obtained unique insights into the ideas and practices shaping women's participation, as well as the potential for positive change.

As this study finds, women's participation in opposition-held, rural areas of northwestern Syria is rapidly changing as pre-revolutionary social norms, customs, and beliefs interplay with radically new circumstances. A striking example of this change, discussed in section 3 below, is the growing role played by women in securing income for their families. As families lose male income earners to armed conflict, imprisonment, or non-employment, men's breadwinning role is being taken on by women. The sectors employing women are a reflection of the particular trajectory of conflict in Syria in the last four years. The state sector, formerly a major employer of both women and men, has largely ceased to exist in rural northwestern Syria. Meanwhile, the civil society sector has been freed from political restrictions and buttressed by grants from abroad. As a result, women are turning to civil society organisations (CSOs) and small philanthropic projects as a source of income. **Growing and strengthening women's participation and leadership in such CSOs, this study argues, is critical at this juncture in time.** CSOs currently take on large responsibilities as informal governance actors, and consolidating women's participation and leadership in CSOs increases the likelihood that women will be positioned to play an active political and social role post-conflict.

Much of the primary research for this study was conducted in three towns in rural Aleppo and Idlib that are relatively representative of mid-size towns in rural areas of northwestern Syria. In these areas, social norms, customs, and traditions continue to shape women's participation and discourse about it. These factors, discussed in section 4, have generated complex new phenomena in a context of armed conflict. Some, like the following, pose challenges to women's participation:

- Women have low levels of access to and participation in numerous opposition governance and service institutions due to insecurity, gender segregation issues, and suspicion attaching to these very institutions.
- Hard-line Islamist armed groups are directly and indirectly restricting women's participation, in part through the pressures they place on other men.
- Women who want to spend time outside the home require the active support of others – often men – more than they previously did. This is due to the rise in violence and the presence of hard-line Islamist groups, factors that amplify pre-existing concerns about dangers to women outside the home.
- Three types of women – widows, divorcees, and the wives of imprisoned men – are experiencing acute financial need and physical and reputational vulnerability.

In other ways, wartime circumstances offer opportunities to expand women's participation:

- Women are able to use public service, or service to the revolution, as arguments to justify forms of participation that may be new, but that are seen as contributing to the public good.
- Female urban returnees, that is, women who fled large cities due to the conflict and returned to their or their husband's hometowns, may be more likely to take political and economic initiative due to economic needs and/or because of a more liberal frame of reference.

This study also sheds light on public discourse about women's participation in ways that are relevant for development practitioners in the Syrian context. Based on a small but rich array of interactions with research participants, ARK found that:

- Until hands-on experiences slightly altered their perceptions on the matter, Local Council (LC) members had a narrow concept of women's participation, tending to believe that women need only be consulted on "matters concerning women."
- There are several narratives about women's participation during wartime; some are empowering and others, victimising. Some narratives are more likely to come out in particular settings. For example, women who said to other women that entering the workforce had been a positive development in their life rarely shared this viewpoint in the presence of men.
- According to research participants, male members of the family/household are critical to women's ability to participate, as they can offer or withhold active and passive approval, encouragement, and protection.
- Religious authorities, whether civilian, military, or judicial, were found to spread messages about women's participation that range from the fairly egalitarian and inclusive to extremely conservative, restrictive, and inegalitarian. Two problematic themes stand out among conservatives: that women's public role should be limited, and that their autonomy and behaviour should be regulated by men.

Based on the study's findings, ARK recommends donors to explore several entry points to support women's participation in local decision-making and social, political, and economic life in opposition-held areas of northwestern Syria, and other regions featuring similar societal dynamics. Preliminary recommendations are to:

- Challenge prevailing concepts about politics that portray women as constituents only on women's issues. Conversely, challenge the assumption that men can speak for women's needs and the needs of the whole community.
- Explore how enhanced community engagement mechanisms can be developed to facilitate women's political participation while circumventing current physical and cultural barriers to women's mobility.
- Support women's participation and leadership in CSOs, particularly given their growing role in local governance and service provision. This is essential to consolidating the gains in women's participation being generated by the transformative power of conflict.
- Identify, test, and disseminate messages that challenge existing narratives that victimise women or downplay their political participation, instead supporting with narratives highlighting women's contributions to society in wartime.
- Explore mechanisms to bolster the role of men in supporting women's participation.
- Develop protection mechanisms to address concerns about women's safety at the local level, to reduce the impact of this barrier to participation.

Introduction

Women's participation in local social, political, and economic life in opposition-held areas of Syria is a surprisingly understudied subject.[1] Four years after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the bulk of analytical work on Syria has privileged military, political, humanitarian, and refugee issues. Other critical knowledge areas for development, peacebuilding, and stabilisation donors and practitioners receive less attention because they seem less urgent and are more difficult to study from outside the country. Women's social, political, and economic participation is one such issue. A study on this issue is long overdue because as research for this report confirms, **conflict is opening opportunities for women's participation that are as promising as they are fragile and in need of support.**

This report fills a knowledge gap on women's participation in opposition-held areas of Syria. It takes northwestern Syria, specifically areas of Idlib and Aleppo held neither by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) nor by the Syrian regime, as its case study. To the knowledge of ARK's project team, this research effort is unique and original. Studies on women's issues in the Syrian conflict that focus on what happens inside Syria, as opposed to neighbouring countries, are scarce. For example, many analytical studies target the policy community and focus on conflict developments, which are largely driven by male military and political players, or serve the humanitarian community by assessing local conditions. When studies focus on women, it is often to advocate for their particular vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), displacement, and refugeehood. Material on civil society participation takes the form of short, one-issue articles, and there is virtually no information on women's economic participation inside the country. Responding to this information gap, **this study is intended to inform practitioners and the donor community about new patterns of women's participation, in order to inform more effective interventions, as well as highlight further research needs.**

The original impetus for this research came from observations articulated by past beneficiaries of ARK-implemented programming that women's participation in public life and local decision-making has been on the decline since the militarisation of the Syrian crisis. This study was designed to examine this claim in greater depth. The resulting report explores how women's political participation has manifested itself in areas where Syrian regime governance no longer exists. It describes how women have made paradoxical and incremental gains in joining the workforce as a result of many changes – social, political, and economic. The report then analyses the conflict-

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[1] For a short bibliography listing publications on women's issues in the Syrian conflict, as well as pre-revolutionary studies on women's participation in local social, political, and economic life in rural northwestern Syria, see "Annex 3: Selected bibliography." The publications listed provided valuable background for this study. As explained in the following paragraph, however, many of the questions specifically examined in this study were not addressed, and a large study on this question addressing larger geographies in greater detail has yet to be conducted.

related and cultural drivers that impact women's participation, and makes recommendations for future programming.

Research was facilitated by funding from the Government of the Netherlands, as part of Sharika, a pilot project to explore entry points for enhancing women's participation in Syria.[2] This five-month project was implemented in three locations (Kafranbel, Idlib; Ma'rrat al-Nu'man, Idlib; and Darat Izza, Aleppo), and these cities became the focus of in-depth research for this report. Independently of their selection for the project, these cities were deemed as an appropriate sample because they are similar enough to each other to be comparable, but different enough from one another to encompass the range of variation across the Aleppo and Idlib countryside. For example, these cities are roughly similar in their distance from major urban centres, religiosity, and reported population size (40,000 − 70,000 including displaced persons), while they differ to some extent in their economic activity, average educational level, armed actor control, and level and nature of exposure to internationally funded programming.

This report's findings are presented across the following sections:

- **Section 2: Methodology** describes the study's data sources, areas of focus, limitations, and where the findings are likely to be most applicable and open to generalisation.
- **Section 3: New forms of women's participation** compares pre-revolutionary patterns of political and economic participation with patterns at this juncture in the Syrian conflict. It also discusses the growth in women's formal economic participation in response to economic stress.
- **Section 4: Norms, customs, and beliefs in conflict** presents the results of participant observation, interviews, FGDs, and secondary research on how social norms, customs, and beliefs impact individual behaviour. It highlights general trends as well as individual and local variation. The end of this section assesses how socio-cultural dynamics have changed during the conflict in response to urban-rural migration, the decline of the state sector, the rise of new institutions, and the presence of extremist actors.
- **Section 5: Local public discourse** presents analysis about public discourse surrounding women's role in society and the role played by women in Syrian society since 2011. It highlights the belief patterns of some of the constituencies interviewed for this paper, comparing constructive and problematic narratives.
- **Section 6: Conclusion and recommendations** presents key perceptions that surround women's participation that could be targeted through future programming.
- The report's **Annexes** include an overview of the Sharika project, a more detailed list of research activities, and a selected bibliography.

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[2] For more information about the Sharika project, see this report's Annex 1.

Methodology

This report represents the ARK research team's analysis of a targeted set of primary and secondary data.[3] Sources included the following (for more detail, see Annexes 2 and 3):

- Secondary literature on women's participation in Syria, before and during the conflict;
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation, and FGDs conducted by the project team with individuals reached during the course of the Sharika pilot project;
- Interviews and FGDs conducted in rural Idlib and Aleppo by a sub-contracted research organisation;
- An informal questionnaire administered to 29 women participating in CSOs in Idlib and Aleppo;
- Primary data and research reports generated by prior ARK programming; and
- Open-source research on the Syrian military, political, and economic context.

This study's geographic focus is northwestern rural Syria. Original research mainly focused on Kafranbel, Idlib; Ma'rrat al-Nu'man, Idlib; and Darat Izza, Aleppo. Overall, the report aims to utilise this geographically specific data, combined with an understanding of the northwestern Syrian context, to make more general conclusions about what the countryside of these two provinces and different local economies may present in terms of a programming context.
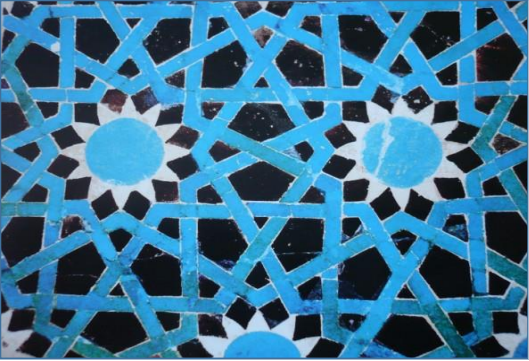
As a result of the scope, the constraints on field research created by the security situation, and the available source base, the study exhibits the following features and limitations:

- Nearly all of the female participants in this study were working outside of the home. Access to women who do not work outside the home was limited by the security conditions in Syria, and by the decisions that had to be made on resource allocation for primary research. This presented an opportunity to study a social phenomenon – the rise in women's participation in the workforce – that is known in other conflict contexts and that has the potential to generate lasting socio-political change. Conversely, it meant that insights into the lives and choices of women who do not work outside the home were obtained in large part from women who used to be homemakers but now worked, or from the husbands of stay-at-home wives.[4]

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[3] One Syrian analyst/researcher and one international analyst/researcher, both members of the ARK project team, conducted this study. Part of the data collection was sub-contracted to an independent research organisation (for FGDs and interviews in Syria). ARK's broader programme team, consisting of the two analyst/researchers, and two regional specialists, one Syrian and one international, analysed the findings and drafted the programmatic recommendations.

[4] In addition to this, it is worth noting that in research settings, participants often attempt to present themselves in the best possible light – according to their representation of their ideal self, according to what they believe other people want them to say, or in response to the identity of the researcher. As a consequence, not everything said can be taken at face value as representative of a participant's subjective state. Both in the research and analytical stages, ARK accounted for this bias, but findings below should still be read with this caveat in mind.

- Information about women's political participation, whether in governance institutions or in activist movements, is less complete in this study. Whereas the research team had ready access to large numbers of women participating in CSOs as lower- and mid-level employees, there were few opportunities to interview women leading CSOs, and no opportunities to interview women serving on LCs.
- Due to a variety of circumstances, the most nuanced data for this study came from research conducted in Kafranbel. For this reason, many of the quotations and insets below reflect research activities targeting that city or involving participants from it. Kafranbel is a particularly good case study of a town where women's participation has changed; this is because it is a microcosm featuring significant male unemployment, an active and relatively well-funded civil society sector, and extremist actors in its periphery. It is an example of what many towns could look like if the economic situation fails to improve, the Syrian regime fails to pay public-sector salaries, and extremist actors continue to make gains. Success stories from Kafranbel, however, show how a combination of Syrian courage and ingenuity on the one hand, and international support on the other, can generate positive outcomes for individual men and women, for governance actors and civil society, and for communities as a whole.

New forms of women's participation

Although women may have played a meaningful role leading political activism in Idlib and Aleppo at the outset of the conflict, at present **women's political participation in formal opposition governance institutions is extremely limited**.[5] While less is known about electoral and selection mechanisms and the extent of women's involvement in them, it is rare for women to be full-fledged members of LCs. In the three towns studied, the only example given of a woman serving on the LC was that of the LC head's wife, whereas dozens of men had served on the three LCs since the outset of the conflict.[6] Activists describing the situation in LCs across Idlib and Aleppo gave similar estimates of virtually non-existent membership: of 24 male and female contacts interviewed in Idlib and Aleppo in December 2014, all stated that there was "no female participation" in their LC.[7] Cases where groups of women had influence over the allocation of public budgets and public planning were found only in communities where LCs had received support through international programmes.[8]

The degree of women's informal interaction with LCs is more variable. It depends on local customs, the reputation of the LC, and the personalities, outlook, and behaviour of both LC members and the individual women potentially seeking access to the institution. Female FGD participants from Kafranbel and Ma'rrat al-Nu'man, two towns that historically had reputations for religious and social conservatism, stated that they rarely interacted with or appeared at LCs. In contrast, the Darat Izza LC was described by some women as more approachable. This may partly be due to more progressive attitudes in Darat Izza towards women's participation in public life. Because the land around Darat Izza is not suitable for agriculture, men and women in this town historically held white-collar jobs in Aleppo city. Further, the LC in Darat Izza has received a number of grants from international donors and is reportedly seen as both efficient and transparent by the public. In this environment, it was likely easier for women like those interviewed – who were highly educated, assertive, and/or related to respected members of the community – to approach the LC or attend their meetings. Such social and cultural variables are explored in greater detail in the following section.

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[5] As concerns informal political activity, anecdotal evidence suggests that activist groups organising Friday demonstrations, as well as media activist groups, have much higher rates of male than female participation. There are occasional counter-examples. For example, in the second half of 2014, women in both Idlib and Aleppo independently staged public demonstrations to exert pressure on local armed groups.

[6] In the week preceding the release of this report (early July 2015), Ma'rrat al-Nu'man elected its first two female LC members. There is reason to believe that this development was partly influenced by LC-CSO interactions generated during the course of the Sharika pilot project. *See inset page 27 for more details.*

[7] The research team received anecdotal evidence that women have served on LCs (Daraa, Aleppo), and that one tried to run for the Aleppo Provincial Council but was unsuccessful.

[8] This was the UK-funded Tamkeen project, which provides subgrants to committees composed of CSO and LC members; in some locations, women were brought into decision-making by the creation of women's committees that fed up the results of their deliberations to male-dominated committees.

The burgeoning field of CSO and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has opened new opportunities for women to participate as employees, volunteers, and participants in activities and events organised by those CSOs. CSOs in which women participate include cultural centres, child-care centres, human rights organisations and advocacy groups, women's centres, and relief organisations. These NGOs are funded by international as well as Syrian expatriate donors. Some organisations are more informal, as in the case of small-scale philanthropic projects. For example, several research participants mentioned that they had received such grants. In one case, the participants received funding for a few months of cooking for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and in another, the funding enabled them to give sewing classes. Women also have a growing presence in the Syria Civil Defence.[9]

The most striking finding about patterns of women's participation concerns how this phenomenon has changed due to the circumstances of conflict. **As has been observed in many conflict settings in the 21st century, conflict forcibly brings about social change and can bring women into the formal economy as local economies are destabilised and men are mobilised for, or incapacitated by, military and political activity.** Rural northwestern Syria is no exception to this phenomenon.

A woman teaches Arabic to young children at the Child Care Centre in Kafranbel, Idlib. This CSO employs a large number of women, although outward-facing activities of the organisation, such as meetings with the LC or armed actors, are handled by men.

Photo credit: Child Care Centre Facebook page

Before the conflict, women's participation in the formal economy nationwide was relatively low, standing at approximately 20% for women above 15 years of age.[10] Women in the remaining 80% who were not retired or incapacitated were largely responsible for work at home, such as caregiving to children and the elderly, hospitality, and upkeep of the home. No statistics were found for labour-force participation in rural Idlib or Aleppo before the conflict; most likely, it stood higher than the national average due to the presence of the agricultural sector, which employed women in large numbers. Judging from anecdotal reports and data on local economics, however, there is reason to believe that more – perhaps many more – households depend on income from women than did so before 2011.

According to interviews and focus groups, the circumstances of conflict have caused a decline in some male breadwinners' ability to provide for their families. Interviewees frequently cited the following situations:

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[9] The Syria Civil Defence is an impartial emergency-response organisation operating in opposition-held areas of Syria, whose activities include search-and-rescue operations – principally in response to aerial bombing attacks – as well as other community response services such as citizen evacuation, road-clearing, and fire-fighting. Women have been training with the Syria Civil Defence in small numbers since 2014, and their numbers have risen significantly in 2015 as awareness spreads, demands for female responders rises, and facilities are developed to accommodate female staff.

[10] Source: International Labour Organisation Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM) 2009, cited in UNICEF, "Syria Gender Equality Profile 2011. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Syria-Gender-Eqality-Profile-2011.pdf.

- **Women find themselves at the head of households because their husband is no longer at home:** he may be imprisoned by the regime, or killed while fighting or by shelling. Such women, often referred to as "wives of martyrs," are seen as particularly needy and receive in-kind and monetary support from relief organisations. It was noteworthy in this respect that when LCs participating in the Sharika pilot project had to make decisions about beneficiary selection for livelihoods workshops targeting women, both of the LCs running such workshops prioritised widows and the wives of prisoners.

- **A man who formerly depended on a government salary remains eligible for it, but cannot go to collect it.** This applies to government employees from Aleppo and, more recently, Idlib. Salaries must be collected in regime-held areas, but the road there from opposition-held areas is long and dangerous. The journey from Darat Izza to Aleppo city used to take three hours; as of the spring of 2015, it takes three days, because travellers must enter regime-held areas from Hama province (there is no passage into regime-held Aleppo city across the front lines), as can be seen from the map below.[11] Men in Idlib used to be able to collect salaries from Idlib city, but salaries have been cut off since the opposition takeover of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur. According to one interviewee, the problem has also grown more acute in the last year because while groups of people were formerly able to delegate one person to collect salaries on their behalf, this is no longer permitted.
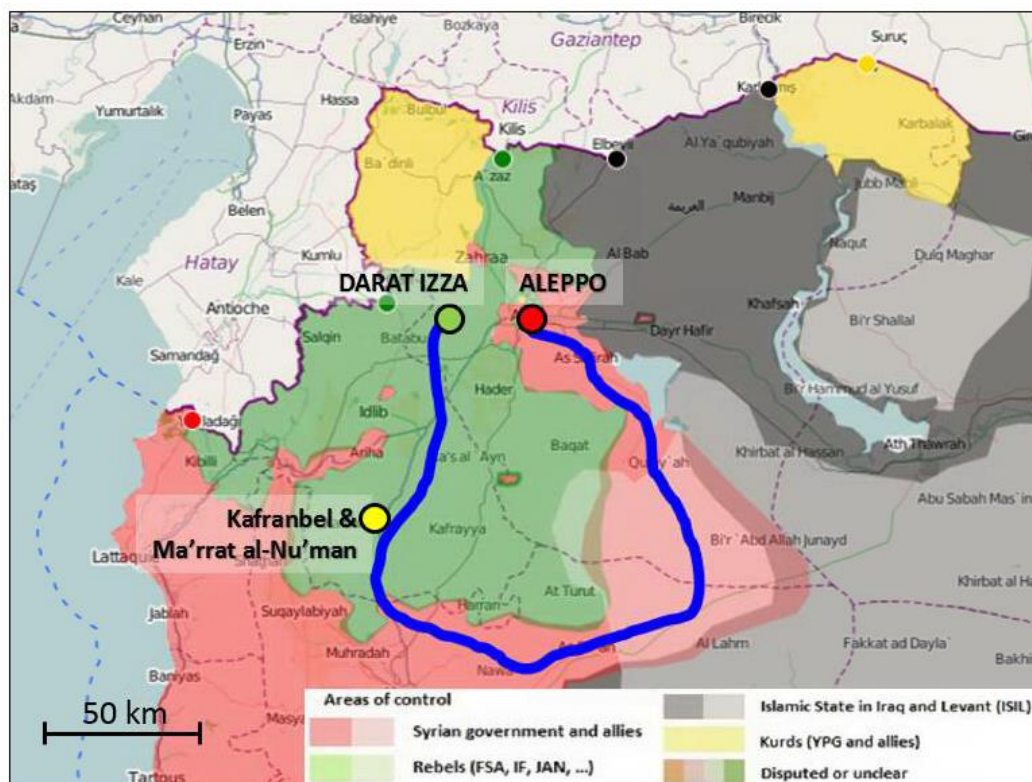
- **A man who formerly depended on a state salary is no longer eligible for it because he defected.** This phenomenon was reported frequently by participants from Kafranbel, a town that had a high level of employment in the Syrian army and security services. Policemen and army officers who returned to Kafranbel after defecting were not

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[11] Background map source: adapted from Agathocle de Syracuse, 21 April 2015, http://www.agathocledesyracuse.com/archives/318.

able to find jobs commensurate with their skills.

- **A husband, brother, cousin, or other male provider is unable to find work because the local economy has stalled.** Both men and women reported that many businesses had closed, causing a rise in unstable employment and total unemployment. The loss of state salaries, border closures, destruction of industrial facilities, displacement, lack of water, energy sources, electricity, and insecurity have all affected local economic activity.

- **A young male provider is unable to find work because he lacks skills.** This phenomenon has worsened as high schools and universities have closed or become inaccessible.

- **The family business was destroyed by shelling, or abandoned during displacement.** Some IDPs have started new businesses in areas to which they migrated, but participants saw this as the exception rather than the rule.

> ### The need for women in the workforce: A religious leader's observations
>
> **Question:** Are there any reasons why women should or should not participate in civil society, civil society organisaitons, or philanthropic organisations? Is it appropriate for women to work in the present circumstances?
>
> **Answer:** It is essential that women work in these circumstances. There is a shortage of human resources, and as a result we are in dire need of women in this time. In fact, women currently have the larger role in civil society. The only type of work that is not appropriate for women is fighting, because there is a sufficient number of men on the front lines.
>
> *- Syrian, male, 40-year-old religious official in a moderate armed opposition group in the Western Aleppo countryside*

In parallel, family budgets have been squeezed by a rise in prices. Anecdotal examples from one interview (see below inset) cited five- to tenfold increases in the prices of certain goods since the beginning of the conflict.

Further, prices have increased along with the decline in the value of the Syrian pound. To prevent major losses, merchants peg the price of their goods to the dollar rather than keeping them in Syrian pounds. Prices fluctuate on a daily basis and, on the whole, increase (see graph below showing the exchange rate of the Syrian pound against the dollar during the period of research). While the extent of this phenomenon may be exaggerated in reports, inflation is serious enough that some courts in
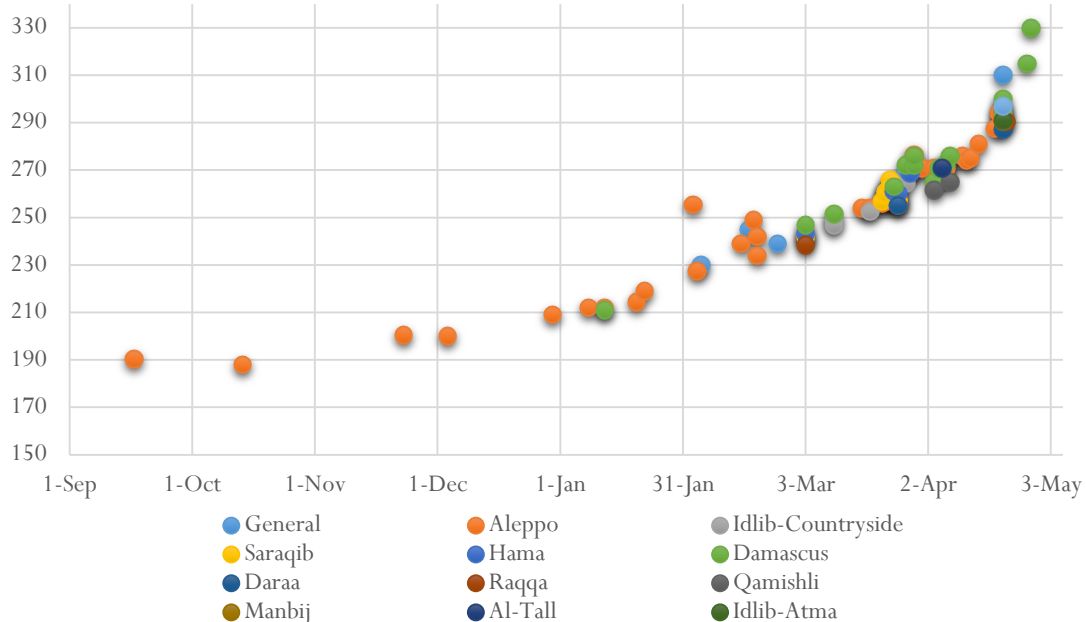
> ### Inflation: an indicative sample
>
> *A male, 50 to 55-year-old research participant from Ma'rrat al-Nu'man, Idlib was asked to give examples of changes in prices from 2011 to 2015. He cited the following:*
>
> | Item | 2011 price | 2015 price | Increase |
> |---|---|---|---|
> | Marlboro cigarettes (1 pack) | 100 SYP | 500 SYP | 500% |
> | Falafel sandwich | 10 SYP | 90 SYP | 900% |
> | Bread loaves (pack of 9) | 15 SYP | 100 SYP | 567% |

opposition-held areas have capped the price of staple goods, some opposition governance bodies are considering phasing out the Syrian pound entirely, and humanitarian organisations across opposition-held Syria make large efforts to provide subsidised flour and bread.

SYP-Dollar Exchange Rate
Open-source reports, Sep. 2014 to May 2015

Legend: General, Aleppo, Idlib-Countryside, Saraqib, Hama, Damascus, Daraa, Raqqa, Qamishli, Manbij, Al-Tall, Idlib-Atma

Families have had various responses to these economic stresses. Family networks have become important sources of support, as has humanitarian aid. It sometimes becomes necessary to sell off family property and valuables, and some men seek employment abroad. According to anecdotes found for this study, it was usually when these options were insufficient or exhausted, or when families became displaced, that **women who were not formally employed began to seek paid employment.**

It is noteworthy that some women making this choice felt it accomplished more than just providing for the family. In families whose children include military-age males, parents may have a preference for a wife to work, so that sons do not have to put their lives at risk by joining armed brigades. As one research participant put it: **"I work so that my son does not become an extremist."** The causal direction for this phenomenon works in two ways: if a woman generates income for the family, then the family's financial situation improves, and the incentive to join an armed brigade is lower. Simultaneously, the woman's activities outside the home give additional responsibilities to her military-age son. If he is the eldest son and the father is either absent or deceased, then he will be needed to chaperone his mother to work, and he may be needed at home to look after younger siblings.[12]

Women participating in the economy are doing so in both existing and new professions. Professions exercised by women before the conflict continue to be practised currently, as in the case of teachers,

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[12] In order to prevent young men from joining armed brigades, families sometimes make the decision to send male children illegally to Turkey. They may have a chance of finding a low-skill job, but these are poorly paid and often exploitative; it is not uncommon for employers to deny Syrian workers their wages at the end of the month.

A volunteer at a medical clinic in the western Aleppo countryside treats a child for leishmiasis. Women at the clinic, who are untrained in nursing and learn skills from the other volunteers, are filling the gap left by the post-2011 exodus of trained medical professionals from Syria. Experience in a clinic like this could eventually put a woman on the path to a paid position in another humanitarian organisation.

Photo credit: Basma Syria

nurses, and doctors. Other professions have seen more change. Before the conflict, women also worked as engineers, lawyers, and judges, but according to several research participants, few women remain in these professions, either because they have emigrated or because they no longer find opportunities for employment. Patterns in the agricultural sector are less clear, but participation may also be on the decline.[13] One major area of employment for women has been CSOs and NGOs. Because their activities range from media and publishing to human rights advocacy, aid distribution, cooking, needlework, and childcare, CSOs are employers of women with wide ranges of skills and educational levels.

After studying potential discursive biases, the analytical team judged that widespread reports from research participants about women's increasing contribution to household income were credible, at least for the areas where data was available – Kafranbel, Darat Izza, and Ma'rrat al-Nu'man.[14] Some qualitative data points illustrating this phenomenon include the following:

- The large number of persons stating that women currently assume greater financial burdens in their families.
- Statements that, in Kafranbel where men face high unemployment rates due to the loss of salaries from the regime, women's participation in the economy is becoming "normal."
- Reports that capacity-building initiatives that could generate more income have had far more turnout than providers can absorb. In one location, a sewing workshop initiated by the Sharika project received over 450 applications for 45 trainee positions; in another, a sewing class reached a turnout of approximately 90 women within a month of being established.

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[13] Agriculture has always had a high female participation rate, and this rate increased in the years leading up to the conflict. In the two decades leading up to the Arab Spring, women took on increasing responsibilities in the agricultural sector as men migrated to cities or Gulf countries looking for work.

[14] This finding is caveated here because reports about why women work are inevitably shaped by discursive norms and methodological biases. For example, individuals may overstate the role of financial need in motivating women's work, as a result of cultural expectations surrounding women's participation (it may be inappropriate, in some contexts, for women to mention a desire for independence); conversely, they may understate financial need due to the stigma that associates to being poor. Further, people may state that women around them work due to financial need – this without knowing what these women truly think – simply because they see this as the most plausible explanation for the changes they see happening in their society as a whole. ARK's analytical team weighed these discursive biases against the large number of independent reports pointing to growth in formal employment, and concluded that the reports were at least indicative of a change that, while it cannot yet be quantified nor its reasons fully broken down, is certainly widespread enough that it is catching many people's attention.

- In addition, a questionnaire administered to working women in Kafranbel and in Darat Izza suggested that a number of women may be joining CSOs because of their declining financial situation. The questionnaire was only meant to provide a qualitative snapshot into the profiles of women joining CSOs, but its findings are suggestive; key points are listed in an inset.[15]

Profiles of women seeking employment in CSOs

A questionnaire administered to 29 women in Darat Izza and Kafranbel gave a snapshot of women seeking paid employment, some for the first time in their lives. Each of these six women, in addition to 8 others in the sample, described themselves as the primary breadwinner in their families.

|	
The 24-year old wife of a man imprisoned by the regime: she has been working for 9 months because of "the economic situation"	A 40-year old married woman: she has been teaching sewing for two years because of the family's "declining financial situation"
A 32-year old married woman educated to the ninth-grade level: she had practised sewing at home and had not worked before, and has just started working as a seamstress due to "financial necessity"	A woman describing herself as the "widow of a martyr" (man killed during the conflict): declining to specify her educational level, but clearly only semi-literate, she is working for the first time in a CSO "to provide for my children"
A woman with a bachelor's degree in English who is working as a seamstress: she began to work to "help my husband because he was out of a job"	A 40 year-old married woman educated to the ninth-grade level: she is participating for the first time to "help with household expenses"

Other women highlighted their desire to assert themselves, to have more independence, to transfer their knowledge, or to contribute to the revolution. *See main text and footnotes for more on the questionnaire's methodology.*

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[15] This questionnaire was administered by two field coordinators for the Sharika project to women employed in CSOs. Field coordinators were e-mailed a document including multiple-choice and open-ended questions such as "What prompted you to participate in this CSO?" and "In your view, what obstacles may women in your community face if they want to participate in a CSO like yours?" and "Of these, which have you personally experienced? How did you overcome them?", and instructed to print out and administer the questionnaire to women working in as many CSOs as they could reach in their town in a ten-day period. Because the research setting could not be fully controlled, the research was meant to generate qualitatively rich, not quantitatively robust, data. The results predictably showed biases: thus a low-skilled, widowed enumerator who describes herself as working because she needed income returned a disproportionate number of questionnaires describing people in circumstances at least partly similar to hers, while a high-skilled, married enumerator who worked before the revolution returned questionnaires describing people with profiles and stories similar to hers. This disparity is attributable to any number of factors (different interpretations of what the task entailed, access to different types of CSOs, individual social networks and comfort levels, social dynamics between enumerators and participants, and, possibly, prompting in response to clarification questions). There was sufficient variation in the handwriting on the questionnaires that there is no reason to suspect any significant fraud.
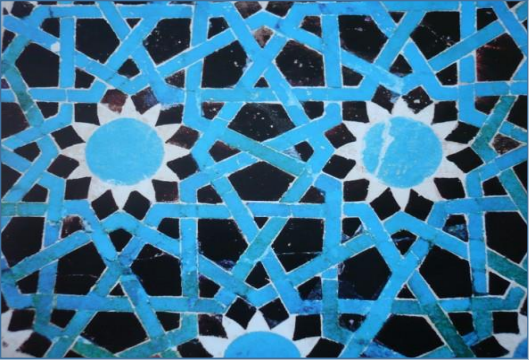
Norms, customs, and beliefs in conflict

Most individual behaviour is intimately shaped by the norms, customs, and beliefs of the society surrounding him or her. This section describes how such social factors shape individual behaviour and approaches to women's participation. The patterns described here are not equally strong in all places, but interviewees and FGD participants across all three locations alluded to their being present. In addition to studying underlying social patterns, this section discusses towards its end exactly how these social norms, customs, and beliefs are shaping women's participation at this point in time, and presents contrasting cases from Kafranbel and Darat Izza to illustrate how dynamics play out differently in cities with different profiles.

Pre-existing norms, customs, and beliefs

A key factor impacting women's participation is that **prevailing ideas about gender roles strongly associate women with the realm of the home, while men are income providers through formal or informal employment.** Although not every household conforms to this model, it is seen as the default situation for a family, and often as a preferable one. Prior research conducted in rural Idlib and Aleppo confirms just how uncommon it was to even conceive of women as principal income earners. In 2011, Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck found through interviews in agricultural communities that when women contributed to household income, their earnings were seen by both men and women as "supplementary." This remained the case even if the woman's earnings were, in absolute terms, greater than the man's. Women's contributions to household income also were, at least until the 2011 uprising, also reportedly rarely discussed in public. In the study just mentioned, interviews conducted with male agricultural contractors showed that "Some husbands or fathers expressed privately their appreciation of women's earnings but were ashamed to admit publically their inability to provide for their families."[16]

Participants in research towards this report reported similar beliefs in their communities. These conceptions of gender roles, in turn, can impact women's participation in various ways:
- **Domestic vs. non-domestic division of time.** Due to their expected responsibilities in the home, women are less likely to have the time, desire, or rhetorical justifications to participate in work or political meetings outside the home. A very tangible record of this dynamic appeared in the results of the questionnaire that was described at the end of section 3: Of the available options on the questionnaire, "responsibilities in the home" were at the forefront of what women considered to be challenges that they faced when trying to participate in CSOs.

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[16] Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck, "Does the feminisation of agricultural labour empower women?", p. 11.

(The handcuffs are labelled:)

"Norms and traditions"

Participants in a group activity involving 40 people (men and women aged approximately 20 to 65) were divided into groups and asked to reflect on questions about their communities and their individual role in it. Participants were requested to draw their responses on a sheet of paper; responses were anonymous.

One group was asked the question:

"What's keeping you [from getting started]?"

Below are the responses given by three of the four female participants. A striking commonality between these drawings is their reference to **barriers generated by society, social norms, and the judgment of other people.** As the remainder of this section discusses, social norms and traditions strongly shape the space allowed for women's participation.
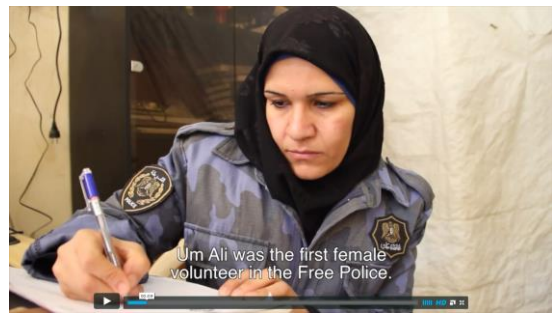

(Without a label, but implying):

"Feeling like I'm in a cage"

"The eyes of society"

- **Men's reaction to being unemployed.** Several research participants stated that a man is seen as having "failed" if he cannot provide for his family. This finding echoes that of

Abdelali-Martini and Van de Pryck, who found that men were ashamed to publicly admit that their wives provided most of the family income. Situations like this can cause tension at home: there are occasional reports of verbal or even physical abuse on the part of male spouses. One research participant stated, without giving specifics, that this had been the case with her husband when she began working; conversely, his attitude had improved when he was able to find a small job again.

Traditions that privilege men's, not women's, political participation and see men as the representatives of women's voices outside the home.[17] This is manifested in:

- **Absence of direct representation in LCs.** As noted in section 3, women are virtually absent on LCs: it is rare for women to be considered or to prevail in formal and informal selection mechanisms for LC membership. Some women may have a voice selecting a large family's nominee for the LC, but few women have any direct sight over LC decisions. Most women have only two indirect methods to influence the work of the LC. The first is to take action via suggestion and complaint boxes, which exist in some LCs. The second is to have a male relative represent their interests.[18]

- **Failure to solicit women's views on issues of public interest.** The track record of many LCs suggests that unless specific incentives have been given to this effect, no special effort is made to directly involve women in consultations with the public.

Gender segregation traditions derived from social custom and Islam, and the perceived sexual connotations and risks of movement outside the home. Examples of this factor at work include:

- **Avoidance of mixed-gender settings.** To varying degrees, unwarranted mixing between the sexes is frowned upon; exceptions include large mixed-gender family gatherings, which are common in rural Aleppo and Idlib, and at universities, where gender mixing is seen as unavoidable. Nonetheless, and

A still from a video report about Umm Ali, one of the first female volunteers to the Aleppo Free Police, who joined approximately two years into the institution's establishment. The need for female participation in opposition police forces became evident as male domination of the police corps created difficulties searching female suspects and houses, while also deterring women from approaching police stations to file complaints. Full frontal shots of unveiled women are rare and difficult for media stringers to obtain. Out of concern for their safety and respect for social norms, Syrian women, particularly in rural areas, prefer to cover their faces when appearing on camera.

Photo credit: Aleppo Free Police

particularly in rural communities, mixed gender gatherings with strangers are viewed with suspicion by authority figures, and they are described as disapproved of, inappropriate, or uncomfortable.[19] This preference can complicate women's inclusion in institutions that are

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[17] These traditions are linked to and reinforced by many others in this list. They have been separated on their own here in order to facilitate highlighting background assumptions that shape interactions with LCs and other political actors.

[18] A third option may also be to raise an issue with an LC member's wife. This was named as a mechanism by an LC member, but its feasibility was not independently confirmed.

[19] Stigma in such settings attaches both to young unmarried women, who can be cast as flirts, and to married women, who may be cast as immodest or disrespectful to their husband. (One interviewee said that in his view, the members of conservative armed groups might go so far as to say that CSOs are deliberately designed to be spaces for men and

dominated by men, such as LCs, the Syria Civil Defence, the local police, and some CSOs.

- **Restrictions and fears surrounding photography.** Several research participants stated that women fear being photographed outside the home or being in mixed-gender settings, and then having their picture circulated and commented upon on social media.[20] When asked to explain, the participants said that a woman whose picture was taken might be "talked about," or that her husband might become jealous. These respondents believed that fear of being photographed could make women hesitate to participate in a CSO or join a consultative meeting held by the LC.

- **Limited appearance by women at LC buildings, even for routine complaints.** LCs are overwhelmingly dominated by men, leading to patterns where the interface between the family and the LC is usually handled by men. Except when both spouses go together, household concerns needing to be raised with public authorities are more likely to be communicated by a male than a female member of the household. On two occasions, interviewees asked if women in their communities visited the LC building answered in the positive but described the women as "widows." This suggests that in their mental construct, the absence of a male relative was the most likely, or at least the most appropriate, explanation for why a woman would visit the LC by herself.

- **Support for single-sex initiatives.** Initiatives targeting or employing women may face less public resistance when they are entirely single-sex.[21] This reason, and that relating to "corrupt" spaces (see below), helps explain the response given by female FGD participants that the best way to represent their needs at the LC was to create a single-sex women's bureau physically separate from the men's.

Protection of women from "corrupt" spaces. In several interviews, respondents – mainly men – said that certain institutions are inappropriate for women and as a result, men prefer that women avoid them. One argument given was that the institutions were "corrupt." The corruption perception attached to institutions that were deemed to be corrupt under the regime. Examples are the police and LCs, which are seen as the equivalent of security services and municipalities, respectively. Independent humanitarian NGOs and LCs are also accused of corruption and favouritism. One respondent said that men want to protect women from corrupt spaces because they do not want to face situations in which the reputation of their wife, sister, or female relative could be compromised (see inset, and paragraph on reputational issues below). Institutions like children's day-care centres, schools, and health clinics appear less likely to incur such criticisms.

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women to mix). Men also stated they avoided mixed-gender settings, fearing accusations that they have been disrespectful towards a woman.

[20] Media activists in Syria and stringers for international news channels often report that they have trouble obtaining women's permission to film them, even if they are wearing the full face veil. Female participants in workshops likewise asked that they not be photographed in any recognisable fashion. When pictures had to be taken for monitoring and evaluation purposes for the Sharika project, some women consented to have their faces shown, on the condition that the picture only go to the donor.

[21] As noted above, some Syrian Civil Defence teams in Aleppo and Idlib include women, and efforts are specifically being made to mitigate concerns about gender mixing by building, e.g., separate women's social spaces, changing rooms, and ablution spaces.

The belief that women are vulnerable to sexual and physical threats, and that they are entitled to protection. The conflict context has added new dimensions to this perception:

- **Protection of women from sexual threats and from insults to their dignity during routine movement on the street.** Within cities, perceived threats include harassment by strangers and questioning of women's sexual propriety if they are out by themselves. The presence of IDPs, who are seen as "strangers" from outside the community, leads people to perceive the outdoors as a more dangerous place. Practically speaking, these concerns mean that women may need to make special accommodations if they are to leave the home, posing special challenges for women without an adult male in the household (see inset below).

"Without the sewing workshop, I don't have an excuse to leave the house": Perspectives on women's mobility from Kafranbel

The three anecdotes below illustrate the difficulties faced by women seeking to go out and about in Kafranbel, Idlib. Despite major changes since 2011, the town remains relatively conservative and is currently surrounded by, and occasionally feels the presence of, global salafi-jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra.

- **The contrast between stated norms and reality:** In one all-female FGD, women from Kafranbel stated that while personally, they were not afraid of going out by themselves and women did not always need chaperones, in reality women would go to the market together because this made them more "comfortable."
- **The fear of being judged:** Privately, a participant in this FGD who does not have an adult male in the household added that when she went outdoors by herself, she often felt uncomfortable and afraid of how people would judge her.
- **Regretting lost independence:** When the Sharika pilot project concluded in Kafranbel, several dozen women who had participated in a sewing and knitting workshop (a project selected by the community) participated in a graduation ceremony. An observed who attended the ceremony reported that "Several women at the ceremony were crying… saying, 'I desperately wish this activity were extended. We've gotten used to going in and out of the house [to attend this workshop], but now that it's over, we no longer have any excuse to leave the house.'"

- **Protection of women from harassment by armed groups, mainly at checkpoints.** Armed groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa' al-Tawhid and others, which predominate in Idlib province and in some parts of Aleppo, require that women travel with a male companion from among their close relatives. They are said to harass, or refuse passage, to both male and female travellers who do not conform to their interpretation of what constitutes an appropriate chaperone (*mahram*). Even when groups like Jabhat al-Nusra do not enforce the rules, they give the impression to residents that this behaviour is expected. The people affected by armed groups' expectations are not just women. On the contrary, hard-line Islamist groups are more prone than the general population to hold men accountable for the behaviour of women under their "guardianship." As a result, it is said, men become more restrictive of their wives' movement and behaviour when extremist groups are present, because they fear violent or

non-violent retribution against them.[22] The anecdote below illustrates this phenomenon.

- **Protection of women from physical threats.** Particularly since the militarisation of the conflict, the outdoors are seen as dangerous, and as more dangerous for women than they are for men.

A journey through Idlib: a woman who works at a CSO tells her experience travelling through checkpoints manned by salafi-jihadi groups

"I recently had to take a trip for work that entailed leaving the city. I set out with three of my co-workers. One of them was male and the other two were girls, both unmarried. In the middle of the countryside, we came across a checkpoint run by hard-liners [hard-line Islamist armed groups]. At the time, our faces were uncovered. **They told the men in the car with us, "If we see something like this next time, we'll confiscate your car and sentence the driver to 9 months in prison.** And the man who is responsible for the woman [without a face covering], he also gets 9 months in prison." It was especially bad because one of us wears a lot of makeup. The men [travelling with us] were very scared. The director of my CSO [in rural Idlib] heard the story, and now he has banned make-up at the workplace, because he's afraid of going to prison himself."

It should be noted that perceptions of the dangers posed by different physical spaces vary depending on their proximity and familiarity. Anecdotally, it appears that women may have more freedom of movement in places and situations that are perceived to be safe. Thus, a female participant in an FGD who stated at one point that women rarely went out alone added that women in her town can still be found on the street as late as 11 p.m., when they return from gatherings with family and family friends. This is probably because such gatherings take place within the same neighbourhood (which are often organised around families), and because a male family member can be found to walk with her back to her home.

The singularly high stakes of the behaviour of women for the whole family. Women play an important role upholding the reputation of their families. Thus, if a woman is perceived to transgress acceptable behaviour and speech, this reflects poorly on her and also on her male guardian. This means that the whole family has a stake in how a woman behaves and may have more of a say in her decisions. Likewise, a woman is likely to carefully weigh her choices when considering how they will impact her family's reputation.

An understanding that men have the final say on certain decisions in the family, such as whether a woman works or whether she can go out of the home. Several FGD participants complained about this phenomenon, saying that men are "authoritarian" or that they "believe themselves to be above women." According to female research participants, a woman usually needs a male authority figure's implicit or explicit approval in order to leave the home.

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[22] Interviewees gave the hypothetical example of young men watching videos of men being whipped by members of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant for failing to exercise proper guardianship over women (e.g., not forcing them to veil their faces, or allowing them to go about without a male chaperone, or *mahram*). An FGD participant hypothesised that such young men might imagine that the same fate might await them if Jabhat al-Nusra, the most conservative groups in their areas, were to disapprove of their behaviour. There is also precedent with the infamous case of Jabhat al-Nusra members storming the Mazaya women's centre in Kafranbel in early 2015. That incident was widely denounced by the community, especially because the centre was a women-only space, but it did spread fear about the limits to which women could take initiatives that raised their public profile.

Women who participated in an FGD on women's participation, and who responded to questionnaires, made it clear that they saw their husbands as critical to their own decision-making (see inset below, as well as section 5).

Selected quotes from a FGD with participants from Kafranbel, Idlib. The town reportedly has a high rate of female economic participation because many men lost their jobs in the public sector. Participants in the FGD said that women's work was becoming "normal," and they gave special attention to the role played by their husbands in supporting them through this change.

"People are much more willing to allow women to work; they have begun to accept the idea. Especially with all the people who defected from the regime and went back to the village. Men would yell at their wives or get angry if they worked. They are not used to the idea that they would not be the ones providing for their family. But now, it's just become normal."

"Men really appreciate the fact that women are working."

(another participant, reacting to the above)
"….Her husband does the dishes!

My husband picks up his coat, and sometimes he helps me carry food to the table. I feel he helps me."

"When I started working, my husband's reaction was not supportive. He had nothing to do, sitting around the house all day. He would yell and get angry. But now about two years later, he has found a small job and his mentality has changed. He has become more OK with it. His attitude has also changed with the example set by women in the rest of society."

"My brother appreciates the fact that I work because that way, he can focus on providing for his family.

I know he appreciates it because he doesn't prevent me from going out of the house or working. He doesn't interfere with my life."

"Men have become more cooperative. My husband would strongly have been against my working, before he went to prison. He didn't want me to work. But now men can't say anything. Society's ideas have changed."

How have these norms impacted women's participation during an armed conflict?

A number of the social norms, customs, and beliefs described above have acted to restrict women's participation since the onset of the crisis. Examples include that:

- Revolutionary institutions that replaced regime institutions have very limited female participation and access rates due to continuing concerns about gender segregation and women's reputations, as well as assumptions about how politics functions.[23]

- Extremist actors appear to be directly and indirectly restricting women's participation. Some of the pressures concern women's dress, a matter that is burdensome, if relatively easy to remedy. Less tangibly, extremist threats reinforce the idea that men have responsibility for women, arguably limiting women's decision-making abilities either now or in the long-term future.

- In the context of armed conflict, the mobility of all members of society becomes constrained, but in the Syrian context women are arguably more severely affected than men. Due to the rise in religious conservatism (real or affected) and concerns about sexual and physical threats, women who want to leave the home require the active support of others – often men – more than they previously did. Generally, women who leave their home are encouraged to be accompanied by at least one man or one woman, and if at night-time, preferably a man.

- The rise of social media facilitates connections between people, but also challenges participation because a woman's physical presence in the street and in mixed-gender settings can become a liability to her if photographed.

- Widows and the wives of imprisoned men find themselves in a unique and paradoxical situation. Their sacrifice is broadly recognised, and they are priority recipients of humanitarian aid and even salaries. It is also an acknowledged fact that such women, who do not have a male family member to accompany them, might single-handedly approach the LC with a concern. Even when they do so, however, single women – whether unmarried, wives of prisoners, or widows – perceive themselves as uniquely subject to public scrutiny as a result of their not having a man to offer physical and moral protection. Even if financial or household necessity forces them into certain patterns of action, they may face additional psychological stress as a result of their personal circumstances.

At the same time, instability and revolutionary circumstances have created the opportunity for significant social change. A number of phenomena stand out:

- As noted above, married women who used to be homemakers, or are newly married, and did not expect to contribute to the household's income are now working outside the home. Some have established CSOs and successfully obtained international funding, and many more could emulate this pattern if provided adequate support.

- Public service or service to the revolution are invoked to justify forms of participation that are seen as contributing to the public good: Civil Defenders, nurses, and teachers cite this argument.

- According to anecdotal evidence, female urban returnees, that is, people who fled large cities due to the conflict there and returned to their hometowns, are taking initiatives to launch projects led by women.

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[23] The patterns now observed in LCs effectively resemble the extremely low participation patterns seen for regime institutions. Statistics from the early 2000s state that women accounted for 8.7 per cent of governorate council members, 4.5 per cent of city council members, 2.1 per cent of town council members, and 1.3 per cent of village council members. Women also controlled 12% of parliamentary seats (source: World Bank World Development Indicators, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS) and had held a few high-level government positions and positions in organisations affiliated with the Ba'ath party.

Although the localities studied contain a large number of similarities in terms of social customs, norms, and beliefs, the women's participation dynamics observed varied by locality and in response to individual dynamics. Even in places where gender segregation norms and taboos are especially strong, new circumstances force people to modify their behaviour and may eventually transform their expectations and beliefs. In Kafranbel, a unique combination of factors – chiefly the city's economic ties to the regime security services and intense international interest that made its civil society sector disproportionately strong – has accelerated women's participation in paid employment. Research participants believed that the experience of the past few years is changing local perceptions of what is acceptable. This phenomenon may accelerate in Idlib province in future months as a consequence of opposition armed groups' takeover of Idlib city and Jisr al-Shughur in March and April 2015. A massive civilian exodus has driven urban populations back into the countryside, and because the regime has cut the salaries of public-sector workers, households and families may again turn to women to help cover the cost of living.
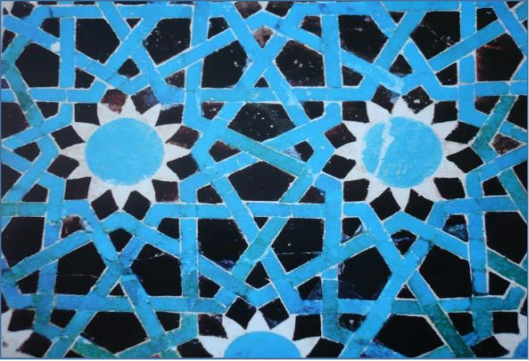
Local public discourse

Within this study's small sample size, several observations could be made about mental constructs that shape how people talk about women's participation. Understanding how different constituencies speak about women's participation is critical to assessing viable programming entry points, identifying potential partners, and developing strategic communications messages. This section describes general trends pertaining to LC members, women who work outside the home, and other narratives propagated by society as a whole; findings on the views of religious leaders are presented in an inset.

Women's political participation is a narrow concept. Political actors are apt to say that women's participation and voice in local politics is needed on "women's issues," but not on political issues in general. Two interviewees for this report specifically said that women should be included in LC planning if the issue "concerns women," such as women's projects like sewing or knitting classes; but that for issues like electricity and water, women did not need to be consulted. The two interviewees gave different explanations for this reasoning.[24]

This attitude also works in the opposite direction: if women are involved in the political process, then that is because they are being consulted on women's issues. While the exact dynamics of this attitude cannot be proven, it became manifest in the implementation of the Sharika pilot project. One example comes from a workshop discussion with LC members from one of the pilot project locations. When prompted to brainstorm ways in which women's voices could be better represented in a decision about how to allocate sub-grants, the LC members, and one woman in attendance, immediately jumped to the conclusion that the sub-grant should be allocated to directly benefit women. At a macro-level, a similar dynamic played itself out in another location, where consultations with the community generated a programme to target women.[25]

> ### Bringing women onto the Local Council: a success story from Ma'rrat al-Nu'man
>
> In April, the LC in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man was dissolved under popular pressure related to perceptions of inefficiency. Following the Sharika project, which had involved youth groups, women, and LC members in a locally-designed community engagement mechanism, the LC was put up for re-election in June. Youth who had participated in the project galvanized to lobby for greater representation on the council. Their move emboldened two women – a teacher and a lawyer – to run for election. The elections unseated senior members in favour of progress-oriented youth. To the surprise of many locals, the two female candidates won seats on the new Local Council, where they have assumed leadership of the LC's Legal Office and Office of Education respectively. Both women are proving to be active and well-regarded participants within the LC; the lawyer is even drafting a new bylaw for the Local Council.

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[24] One LC member gave the reason that "everyone agrees about electricity and water projects," while in a separate context, an activist said, "if the issue is one that concerns women, women need to be included; but for things like electricity repair, it's better that men [take care of it]."

[25] It should be noted that female political participation in the three locations had little precedent, and it is natural that the community perceived that the first project involving women in its planning stages would necessarily serve them.

Perceptions like these are paradoxical and problematic, because women's interests in fact go beyond so-called "women's issues" like child-care, knitting, or even education and nursing. Major public service issues like water, electricity, and waste collection would benefit from women's input, as women are the main consumers of electricity and water, and are familiar with patterns of household waste generation.

Narratives about women's participation in the revolution and during wartime stress, either separately or simultaneously, women's heroism, sacrifice, and suffering. Words used to describe women's contributions included "sacrificing" oneself, "giving" to the revolution, or "suffering." Women's positive contribution to the revolution was highlighted in stories of political activism, and later cooking or sewing garments for opposition armed groups. Stories of sacrifice described widespread imprisonment and/or sexual abuse at the hands of the regime; displacement and the destruction of homes; and the loss of children, husbands, and relatives to violence. The balance of empowerment and victimisation in these narratives is subtle, as stories of this kind are usually narrated together.

At the individual level, women hold multiple narratives about women's economic participation: they hold both victimising and empowering narratives about what they and others are experiencing (see insets at right). The negative narrative highlights that women have begun working outside the home due to personal loss and material hardship. This narrative of suffering, excessive burdens, and resignation to unwanted circumstances was frequent in public and mixed-gender discussions of women's economic participation. It also emerged in one all-female FGD, where women complained of being "tired" and

under undue "pressure," or of losing their femininity (see example in middle inset). In contrast, however, there is a parallel narrative in which women who earn a living cease focusing on the factors pressuring them into working and instead highlight that they have been strengthened by their experiences (see example in top and bottom insets). Some stated that they had begun to enjoy their work in spite of its demands. Sometimes, research participants held both narratives, saying one or the other depending on the subject of the conversation. In the questionnaire administered to CSO participants, a number of women stated that they worked because they wanted to "prove themselves to society" or acquire more "independence." It was noteworthy that when research participants met in mixed-gender groups, working women did not portray their work in such a positive light, and the subject of independence was hardly ever brought up. Although this may be a coincidence, it most likely reflects their desire to uphold social conventions. For example, they may feel the need to understate how much they want independence if they are speaking with men, and they may also focus on the tragic aspects of their life histories out of respect for others who have experienced similar suffering.

Research respondents often discussed the important role that male members of the family or household played in expanding women's participation. This was reflected in several research sources: individual responses to questionnaires, the proceedings of one FGD, and anecdotes about men who sought jobs for their wives and sisters, or who took daughters to work by foot or by motorcycle. Further, several women in one FGD appeared to conflate their perceptions of what society expected of them and others, and what their husbands deemed to be acceptable. This can be noticed in the inset on social norms in section 4. When they discussed how societal conditions had shifted to become more supportive of women's work, several respondents said that societal norms had changed, and then illustrated that claim by saying that their or someone else's husband had become more amenable or supportive.

Finally, religious authorities and groups play a role shaping discourse on women's participation. There are many kinds of influential religious figures: they include home-grown Syrian imams of various ages; graduates of Syrian sharia colleges who have taken on responsibilities as imams and/or judges; religious personnel in armed groups, often with eclectic backgrounds, who sponsor awareness-raising campaigns for the public and spread religious teachings among combatants; Syrian and foreign fighters who often espouse a zealous, if not extremist, brand of hard-line Salafism, and indirectly coerce the public into adopting certain ways of speaking; internationally known religious icons; and well-respected moderate religious figures both inside Syria and in the Syrian diaspora. Armed groups and civilian organisations have conducted charitable awareness-raising initiatives in which they distribute free *jilbabs*, or modest and flowing garments, to women in difficult financial circumstances. Religious practice is also influenced by the activities of charitable educational and devotional associations, some of which are led by or target women. In northwestern Syria, the messages propagated about women's participation range from the fairly egalitarian and inclusive to extremely conservative, restrictive, and inegalitarian. A sample of religious views from imams and religious leaders in armed groups is provided in an inset on the following page.

ARK contracted a research organisation to conduct interviews with a representative sample of religious authorities. A selection of their views is recorded here:

Woman's duties are to take care of the house, be responsible for raising the children and making them behave, teaching them the correct teachings of religion, treating her husband properly and advising him when he is wrong. As for man's duties, they are to provide a good living for the family.

Northern Aleppo countryside – Religious leader from a brigade ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, 20-25 years old

A woman must obey her husband and preserve her honour, take care of the children, and educate them. A man is responsible for his house and family and he must teach his children good manners; he is the breadwinner and he directs the wife and the children to the right path. He plays the role of the general director of the house.

Western Aleppo countryside – Religious leader from a moderate Islamist-oriented group that has received Western support, 40 years old

The almighty God gave stewardship to men over women. With all due respect to educated women, the final say must be to the man. Woman's duties towards her husband, to make a long issue short, are to obey her husband and not challenge his orders, as in the prophetic saying "when a woman obeys her God and obeys her husband, she is granted the paradise." As for man's duties towards his wife, they are represented in taking care of her. This was the last will and instruction to men by the prophet Muhammad before he died. He said: "I command you to be kind to women, as those who honour their women are decent, and those who insult their women are mean." Islam tells us that women must stay at home because she has a job at home, and I don't mean cooking and cleaning, but bringing up the children.

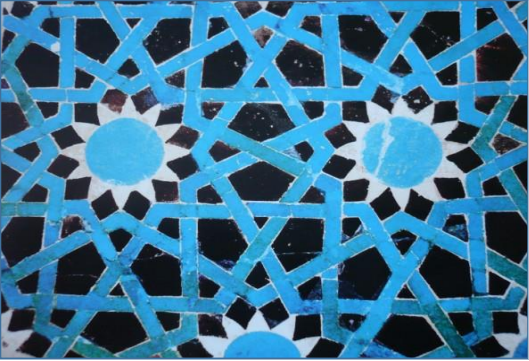*Southern Idlib – Imam of a large mosque, 60-65 years old*

Mutual understanding between a man and his wife leads to correct decisions, but if the husband is fanatic, then decisions will be made by him only.

We need women under the current circumstance but within proper religious terms. If there is an extreme need for women to attend LC meetings, then she can attend, but in a setting that can put women segregated from men. The segregation is made in answer to God's instructions in the Quran and Sunna (prophet's traditions).

Western Aleppo countryside – Imam of a large mosque, 30-35 years old

We cannot say that men make exclusive decisions; it depends on the decision being made. Decision-making power belongs to the spouse responsible for the decision to be made, so there are decisions that men must make and others that women must make. In that case we can have correct decisions, and there is no favour of one over the other. Men and women are alike, and if a man can do something under certain circumstances, then women can do it.

Aleppo city – Imam of a large mosque, who has a reputation for being moderate, 30-35 years old

Conclusion and recommendations

At this particular point in the Syrian conflict, there is a window for leveraging unique opportunities to consolidate and expand women's participation in social, political, and economic life. In many areas of northwestern rural Syria, more women are now working outside the home. Conversely, existing social norms, customs, and beliefs continue to make it disproportionately difficult and uncommon for women to participate in LCs or be consulted on matters of public interest. War has heightened concerns about the sexual and physical safety of spaces outside the home. Those concerns have in turn reinforced both behaviours and discourse that make men key partners in promoting women's participation, even as urban-to-rural migration is setting new trends with an influx of comparatively liberal, educated, and enterprising men and women.

It would be a mistake to take gains in women's participation for granted, however. Past experience has shown that gains made in conflict settings are often reversed when conflict subsides. Women whose social, political, and economic potential could be harnessed to the benefit of their local, regional, or national community will tend to retreat into more traditional roles, to the detriment of a vibrant civil society, representative government, and inclusive transitions. This scenario has a better chance of being avoided if efforts to supports women's participation are designed to work intelligently with and within the constraints of an armed conflict setting.

To be successful, future programming must, in a manner sensitive to local cultural norms, address at least three areas simultaneously: enhancing political participation, creating economic empowerment, and strengthening the capacity for collective action.[26] Political participation is a critical part of participation in public life; under the current circumstances, and given local conditions and cultural norms, community engagement is an appropriate entry point and one likely to succeed in achieving longer term impact. With the majority of the civilian population, particularly women, excluded from local decision-making, efforts to enhance women's political participation can achieve sustainable traction and benefit from a multiplier effect if they leverage broader community engagement and representation efforts. Economically, strategically empowering women to support their families will achieve two objectives: it answers a recognised need, while concretely generating opportunities for participation in public life both physically (with enhanced mobility) and conceptually (creating success stories, a sense of individual and collective accomplishment, and a receptivity to other forms of participation). Finally, it is essential to build capacity for collective action and advocacy. Without a grassroots movement for change, vehicles for individual capacity building, a platform for both moral support and strategy development and, crucially, a broad support base for action, women are unlikely to see meaningful, sustainable changes in their situation and surrounding environment.

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[26] It is worth underlining the importance of culturally sensitive, multi-sectorial, holistic approaches, as compared to one-off skills-based or rights-based programmes. On their own, the former will not be sufficient to achieve real shifts in norms, structures, and practices; meanwhile, overemphasising rights-based approaches may alienate both men and women as stakeholders if these are perceived to be in defiance of what is locally acceptable.

Based on these observations and the study's findings, ARK puts forward the following recommendations for consideration by donors who wish to support expanded women's participation:

- **Explore the use of enhanced community engagement mechanisms to facilitate women's political participation while circumventing current physical and cultural barriers to women's mobility.** In a context where there are few formal or institutionalised mechanisms for constituents to have a voice in local politics, community engagement provides a viable, locally driven process that works with and around many of the barriers identified above. Past ARK programming has shown that community engagement opens avenues for women's participation in local decision-making while changing the attitudes of community leaders on this issue.

- **Challenge prevailing concepts of women's political participation, to make their participation seen as salient on more than just women's issues.** LC members and others in society too often hold that women need only be consulted on matters that directly affect them as opposed to men. This attitude is an unfortunate by-product of prevailing social norms, pre-revolutionary political traditions, and the subsequent trajectory towards male-dominated institutions. The perception is detrimental both to women, who are excluded from decision-making opportunities, and to decision-makers, who lose the insights of half of their constituents. Combating this perception requires both learning by doing — in which the value-added of women's participation is demonstrated — and spreading the message. In tandem with the first recommendation, future programming should also identify, test, and disseminate messages that challenge assumptions about men's ability to speak for women's needs, and men's ability to speak exclusively on behalf of the community as a whole.

- **Support women's participation and leadership in CSOs, particularly given their growing role in informal governance and service provision at the local level.** Women currently participate in CSOs and philanthropic projects that cater to their skills. They are rarely at the head of large organisations, or if they are, they are often invisible to international donors. If women are to participate socially, economically, and politically during and after the Syrian conflict, it is critical that this kind of participation be supported and expanded, enabling women to lead as well as be part of CSOs. Decentralised and fragmentary forms of international funding have turned CSOs into informal or de facto governance actors with equal or greater recognition in the eyes of the public than LCs. Volunteering, working, and leading within CSOs is therefore an empowering opportunity for women, and the women currently working in CSOs may be at the forefront of the transition into other forms of employment or civic and political engagement post-conflict.[27] There is another side-effect of raising women's participation in the workforce: the more women contribute to household income, the less likely their military-age sons may be to join armed groups that offer attractive salaries.

- **Identify, test, and disseminate messages that challenge existing narratives that victimise women or downplay their political participation, replacing them with narratives about women's positive contributions to society in wartime.** Narratives about women's experiences in wartime are a double-edged sword,

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[27] While the presence of capable CSOs offers a strong entry point for bolstering women's participation in myriad forms of public life, we acknowledge that the increasing informal power of CSOs as governance actors is problematic from the perspective of good governance and state-building. While strengthening civil society - and women's roles and leadership within it – is critical for the development of an inclusive and democratic Syria, this must not come at the expense of building formal governance institutions, despite the known challenges posed in the Syrian context by the chronic weakness of the Interim Government and co-optation of local formal structures by armed groups.

as they can be simultaneously empowering and victimising. Too often in the course of this study, both male and female research participants explained that women lost family and property, or became destitute and sought paid employment, without highlighting the individual resourcefulness and courage demonstrated by this change. Alternative narratives, however, are available and sometimes articulated by individuals. They include the positive dimension of contribution to family income, women's strength and ability to bear responsibility, and public service to the revolution. One message resonates with both men and women and could be a promising entry point: that women are providing a service to society in times of need. Most service-based activities are appreciated by communities, but lifesaving services like Civil Defence or emergency care get the lion's share of public attention. Other critical roles currently played by women, such as teaching, child-care, or provision of psycho-social support, deserve more recognition as forms of public service.

- **Explore mechanisms to increase the role of men in supporting women's participation**. Male relatives are enablers to women's participation when they provide (or withdraw) implicit and explicit approval, encouragement, and protection. As hard-line Islamist groups continue to emphasise men's responsibility over women, enlisting male support for active participation is especially critical.

- **Develop protection mechanisms to address concerns about women's safety at the local level.** In the four years since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, pre-existing perceptions about physical and sexual threats to women outside the home have hardened. They have been exacerbated by armed conflict, the breakdown of law and order, the rise of hard-line Islamist groups, the migration of so-called "strange" men into rural communities, the destruction of familiar urban landscapes, and the inadequacy of public lighting. Sexual and gender-based violence is seen as a particular threat to women. Without collective action to address these concerns, neither women nor men will change their behaviours or attitudes in ways that ease restrictions on women's mobility.

Today, much of what is said about Syria revolves around military, political, and humanitarian issues, obscuring the extraordinary transformations wrought by war on fundamental dimensions of social life. Even as violence from the ground and the air afflicts opposition-held areas of Syria, families continue to need to secure livelihoods, raise issues with local governing authorities, stay safe, and maintain a sense of purpose and dignity. In many places, in many families, women are acting out those necessities of life in new ways. Many are braving their fears, real and perceived danger, and social stigma to find paid work, acquire new skills, start CSOs, or volunteer; some, like war widows, defy social taboos to seek remedy with governance institutions staffed mainly by men.

A number of these behaviours depart from traditional gender roles, meaning that change is doubly difficult on individuals, families, and communities. These new forms of participation are, however, as necessary now as they are likely to be beneficial in the future. The Syrian crisis looks set to continue in its current form for at least some time, and women will continue to be needed as political actors, leaders in civil society, and caregivers and breadwinners for their families. Their new push towards participation is fragile and faces real obstacles. Theirs is a call on donors and practitioners to take action, by leveraging the individual potential of enterprising men and women and local institutions to secure social outcomes that benefit Syrian communities as a whole.

Annex 1: About the Sharika pilot project

The Sharika pilot project was implemented with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Netherlands between December 8, 2014 and April 30, 2015. The project aimed to pilot mechanisms that could strengthen women's participation in local-decision making, and to identify entry points for further programming. The Sharika pilot project worked on three levels to support women's participation: opening the socio-political space occupied by governance actors to include a greater role for women; capacitating women and organisations led by them to advocate for women and women's rights; and understanding public attitudes towards, and perceptions of, women's role in society.

Following an initial assessment, ARK identified and selected three towns to pilot this project: Ma'rrat al-Nu'man and Kafranbel in Idlib province, and Darat Izza in Aleppo.

Under Objective 1, ARK successfully convened Local Councils (LCs), Provincial Council (PC) members, and partner civil society organisations (CSOs) from these towns to develop community engagement mechanisms (CEMs) to involve the community in decision-making to allocate Euros 10,000 to a communal priority issue. The theory of change for the pilot posited that if governance actors (predominantly male) and the broader community carry out CMEs that will involve women, this will affect their perceptions of 1) the need for community engagement for more democratic governance, and 2) the value of involving women as stakeholders in community affairs. This would serve as an entry point to establish a foothold for deeper and wider participation.

Partner LCs and CSOs successfully piloted CEMs in all three towns and implemented the projects agreed through them. Though the timeframe presented some challenges, monitoring and evaluation efforts revealed that the project achieved significant, albeit variable, gains in women's participation during implementation of the CEMs. For gains demonstrated during the CEM to be sustained, LC members and other community stakeholders must see value in women's participation in local decision making. This analysis found that all three LCs had come to see value in involving the community generally while only Darat Izza's LC's emphasised engaging women specifically.

Under the second objective, the project identified three partner CSOs concerned with enhancing women's participation and enabled the establishment of two more organisations in Kafranbel and Ma'rrat al-Nu'man. A capacity assessment allowed the team to pinpoint key capacity issues and recommend a programme of support to grow these organisations sustainably, and with the view for impact on level of women's participation. The project also provided three sub-grants to fund micro-projects and establishment costs, where the micro-projects were designed as capacity building, 'learning by doing' exercises. All micro-projects aimed to empower women economically as a step towards greater public participation.

Under Objective 3, ARK conducted research on women's participation in social, political, and economic life in opposition-held areas of northwestern Syria, and submitted a report that explained how pre-existing social norms, traditions, and beliefs interplay with the unique contemporary circumstances in Syria to both perpetuate existing barriers to, and generate new opportunities for, women's participation. The report found that one striking change is the rising workforce participation of formerly unemployed women in response to economic stress. Faced with the absence or non-employment of male income earners such as husbands, fathers and male relatives, women who did not expect to work are now entering the workforce. As the civil society sector opens up and grows, women are turning to CSOs and small philanthropic projects as a source of income.

The findings, observations, and lessons learned from this pilot informed recommendations for further programming on three main entry points: 1) political participation through expanding and formalising community engagement as a form of democratic governance practice; 2) economic empowerment programming; and 3) enabling and strengthening collective action and advocacy through growing the number and capacity of women-led and women-focused CSOs.

Annex 2: Research sources

The table below presents the report's sources in more detail. All research activities except those marked with an asterisk (*) were conducted by ARK; the remainder were sub-contracted to a partner research organisation.

Research activity	Quantity / scope	Subject of research
Participant observation	11 full working days; 60 individuals (LC, CSOs, CSO employees, activists) of which 36 male, 24 female	Gendered interactions, dynamics, and comments General information about women's political, economic, and social participation
Focus Group Discussions	Female CSO employees ages 20-40	Women's political and economic activities
	Female CSO employees ages 20-40	Access to LCs and humanitarian services
	LC members ages 30-65	Community access to LCs Armed groups and LCs
	Female CSO employees ages 20-40 Male CSO & LC members ages 20-65	Women's participation throughout Islamic history
Focus Group Discussions*	Men ages 18-40 (2 FGDs) Women ages 18-40 (2 FGDs)	Transformation of societal and religious values since 2011
	Men ages 25-40, mixed married/unmarried	Honour and scandal
	Men ages 20-35 Women ages 20-35 Mixed men/women ages 35-60	LC track record and accessibility
Semi-structured qualitative interviews	Three male CSO leaders	CSO organisational structures and women's participation in them
	Two interviews with specialised Syrian organisations	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, perceptions of threats to women, social taboos
	Two interviews with LC members	Women's participation in local governance
	One interview with a female nurse	Women's participation in the economy
	24 interviews including LC, police, judicial actors, activists, and students in Kafranbel and Ma'rrat al-Nu'man (Idlib); and Al-Atarib and Darat Izza (Aleppo)	Service availability LCs and CSOs, women's participation therein Women's skills and social roles Barriers to women's participation Religious discourse on women's role in society
Semi-structured qualitative interviews*	Three Syrian imams in large local mosques Three religious personalities in local armed groups, ranging from moderate to hard-line Islamist	Religious leaders' perception of their role in the community; their outreach to communities Men and women's role in society: responsibilities of spouses, women's participation, decision-making Changes in religious values since 2011
Questionnaires (methodology see section 3)	29 female respondents, all active professionals or paid employees of CSOs[28]	Women's participation in CSOs Barriers to women's participation as experienced by individuals, and as reported by others

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[28] Respondents included child caregivers (4), CSO administrators (2), magazine editors (1), participants in sewing, knitting, and weaving workshops/initiatives (11) and instructors in such initiatives (4), facilitators of cultural activities (2), nurses (2), teachers (2), and one physician.

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