



European Asylum Support Office

Syria

Situation of women

Country of Origin Information Report



February 2020

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Cover photo: © [REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi Syrian women hold food aid distributed by humanitarian institutions](#). (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

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It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).¹ The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

‘Refugee’, ‘risk’ and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The first draft of this report was finalised on 18 November 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 10 January 2020. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>

Glossary and abbreviations

CoI	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
HTS	<i>Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham</i>
ICRC	The International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person(s)
ISIS	The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
LDHR	Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i>)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i>)
<i>shabbiha</i>	A pro-government militia
SJAC	Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society (<i>Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk</i>)
TIMEP	Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
UNPFA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USDOS	United States Department of State
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
YPG	People's Protection Units (<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>)

Introduction

This report was drafted by a Country of Origin Information (COI) specialist from the Finnish Immigration Service (FIS), as referred to in the [Acknowledgements section](#).

The purpose of this report is to analyse the situation of women in Syria, focusing mainly on the general situation of women in the country while also paying special attention to area-specific features in those parts of Syria under the control of non-state armed groups, information relevant for international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular to inform the EASO country guidance development on Syria.

Methodology

The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 18 November 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 10 January 2020.

For the Terms of Reference (ToR) of this report, EASO provided input to the Finnish Immigration Service, based on discussions held with COI experts and senior policy experts from EU+ countries² within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. The Finnish Immigration Service defined its ToR taking into account this input.

The ToR can be found in the [annex](#) of this report.

Sources

The report is based on information from UN reports, reports from human rights organisations, academic publications and news articles, relevant when analysing the situation of women in Syria.

The report relies to a large extent on two United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) reports: *Voices from Syria 2018* and *Voices from Syria 2019*. These reports contain governorate-level information on the situation of women and girls in Syria and are based on both quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources (involving focus group discussions, informant interviews, etc.).³ Other seminal sources include the special report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) focusing on sexual and gender-based violence in Syria published by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) on 8 March 2018, and the most recent report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) from 25 November 2019, covering the situation of women in the country.

While assessing the reported violations against women, it is crucial to recognise that possibilities to gather information about these violations are limited. The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted, with regard to data limitations, that sexual and gender-based violence especially is globally underreported and rarely discussed openly in any society, even when the society in question is experiencing a time of peace and normalcy. The report further noted that, during ‘emergency situations’, different types of gender-based violence are ‘widely understood’ to occur and in a significantly aggravated form whether or not data about these violations is available. Factors limiting the availability of data include, inter alia, the fear of stigma and retaliation and the simple lack of (adequate) information.⁴ The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) report of November 2016 listed more specific factors such as the intimidation and repression of activists by Government forces and associated militias, social and psychological pressure and the fear of additional harassment

² All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

³ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 14; UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁴ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 16

experienced by former detainees, and the denial of access to the CoI and other independent human rights observers, affecting the gathering of information in Syria.⁵

Sources with a specific focus on the situation of women and girls in Syrian society⁶ do not generally differentiate between areas controlled by the Government of Syria and those parts of the country still controlled (at least to some extent) by non-state armed groups. It is possible to base this general, country-wide approach on the observation that both the violations against women and girls and the social and cultural factors shaping their lives are mostly similar in different parts of Syria. However, sources often pay special attention to certain area-specific factors such as the effect of repressive social norms imposed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other radical groups in north-west Syria or the military recruitment of women in the Kurdish-dominated north-east.⁷

Quality control

In line with the EASO COI Report Methodology, COI researchers from the departments listed in the [Acknowledgements section](#) performed a peer review together with EASO.

Structure and use of the report

The report consists of two main chapters. The first chapter deals with the general situation of women in Syria, while focusing, in the first section, on the effects of the civil war and on the violations against women during the conflict. Since human rights violations, war crimes, sexual and gender-based violence against women are the most frequently mentioned issues taken into consideration during the refugee status determination process, it was decided to begin the report with a discussion of these issues.

The second section of the first chapter provides more background information to the situation of women in the Syrian society in general, including on patriarchal values, legal status, work and education. This part contains mostly information applicable to all Syrian women irrespective of the geographical and administrative context and also some information on specific issues in the areas controlled by the Government of Syria, affecting the majority of Syrian women.⁸ The role of the Government of Syria is discussed especially in the first section and in the context of violations against women in Syria.

The second chapter of the report – while being considerably more succinct than the first – examines the situation of women in those areas of Syria controlled by non-state armed groups. The sections in this part focus on the situation of women in the Idlib enclave dominated by jihadist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in the Kurdish areas in north-east Syria, in areas under control of Turkey-backed armed groups, and in areas under the influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (respectively).

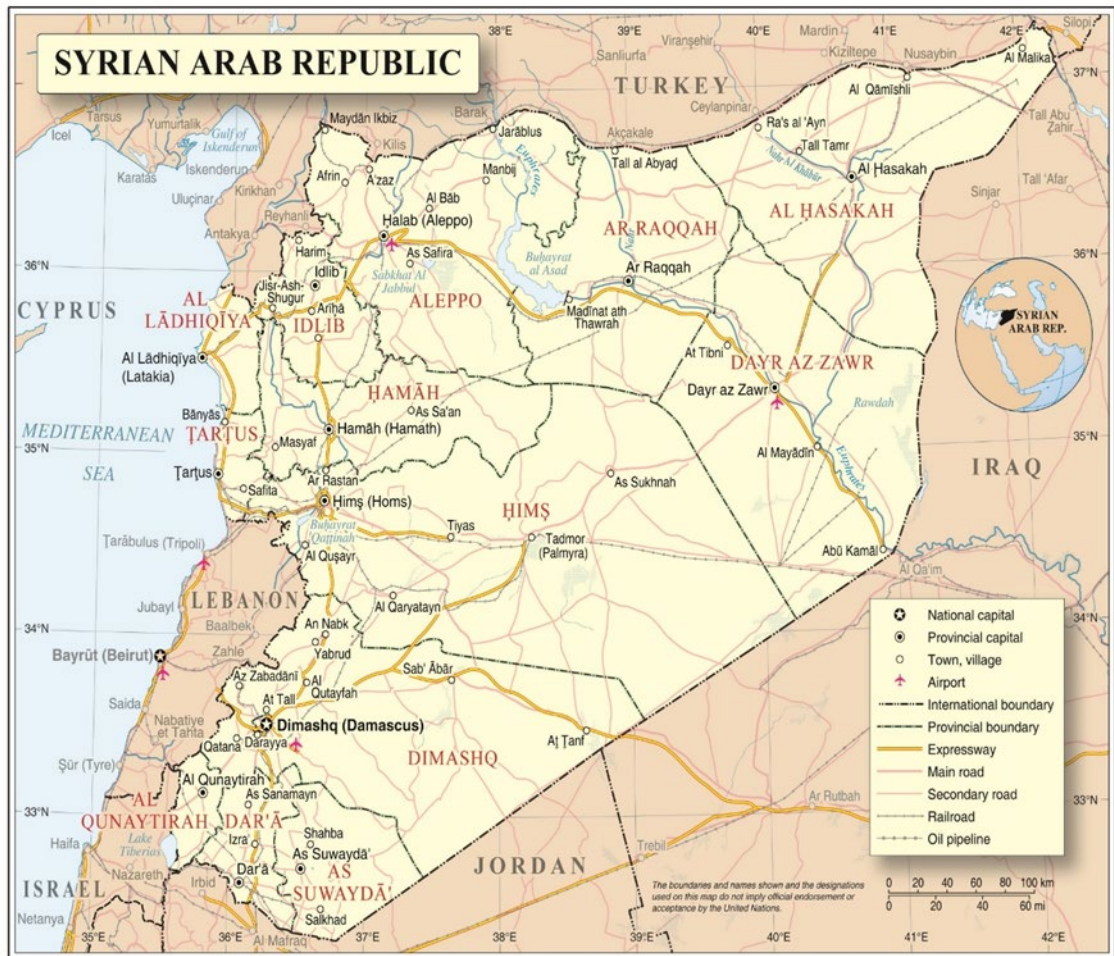
⁵ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 8

⁶ Such as UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#); UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

⁷ The security situation in the Northeast has changed significantly since October 2019. See EASO, Syria, Security Situation, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 39–43

⁸ According to Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team's estimate 'approximately 73 % of the population still inside Syria lives in areas under government control'. Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 23

Map



Map 1: Syria, United Nations⁹

⁹ UN, Syria Map, April 2012, [url](#)

1. The general situation of women in Syria

1.1. Violations against women in Syria

As mentioned in the [Introduction](#), this section discusses the effects of the civil war on women and the violations against women during the conflict. For more information on the background situation of women in society beyond the conflict, including patriarchal values, legal status, work, education, movement restrictions and family status, see [Section 1.2](#).

1.1.1 The effects of the armed conflict on women

Since the outbreak of Syria's popular uprising in 2011 that escalated into an internationalised civil war¹⁰, the situation of women and girls in Syria has been affected by an armed conflict that has lasted more than eight years. According to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000), 'civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons.'¹¹

A United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) 'Voices from Syria' report¹² from March 2019 noted that Syrian women and girls have been 'shouldering the larger portion of the consequences' of the war and the humanitarian crisis that has ensued.¹³ This trend has been evident also during the most recent stages of the conflict, with women and children forming the majority of those affected by the clashes and bombardments in the active and/or recently opened front lines in Syria's north-west¹⁴ and north-east.¹⁵

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) emphasised in several reports that while Syrians of all backgrounds have been affected by immense violence since the outbreak of the conflict, women and girls have been 'disproportionally affected on multiple grounds, irrespective of perpetrator or geographical area'.¹⁶ Similarly, a Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) report of 25 November 2019 concluded that women have been 'the worst affected' due to their 'multiple roles and responsibilities as mothers and caregivers', and due to issues related to their health and status in the Syrian society.¹⁷ The UNPFA report of March 2019 discussed additional profiles or 'layers of social status' for which the risk of sexual and gender-based violence against Syrian women and adolescent girls was higher. These profiles include widows, divorced or separated women (or girls), displaced persons, persons with disabilities and female heads of household.¹⁸ In addition,

¹⁰ Phillips, C., *The Battle for Syria. International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, 2016, pp. 2–3; Lund, A., *Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, December 2018, [url](#), p. 17

¹¹ UN Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000), 31 October 2000, [url](#), p. 1

¹² The UNPFA Voices from Syria reports of 2018 and 2019 are based on both quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources (involving focus group discussions, informant interviews, etc. UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 14; UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹³ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴ In August 2019, the hostilities between Government forces and non-state armed groups in rebel-held parts of Idlib, northern Hama, and western Aleppo governorates were affecting the humanitarian conditions of approximately three million people, of whom 76 % were estimated to be women and children. See OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 10*, 23 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1–2

¹⁵ In late October 2019 women and children were reportedly most affected by the Turkish offensive (Operation 'Peace Spring'), see CARE, *Women in Desperate Need of Assistance in North-East Syria and Iraq*, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4; UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁷ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

adolescent girls in general reportedly ‘bear the brunt’ of the armed conflict because of both increasing risk of sexual and gender-based violence and limitations set by traditional customs and norms.¹⁹

According to a 2016 report by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and several other non-governmental organisations (NGO) focusing on the rights of women in Syria²⁰, the armed violence and repressive practices (associated with the conflict) had a disproportionate impact on women. They were gradually losing their security, homes, lives, family members, and social status as a result of systematic targeting of civilians, proliferation of arms, destruction of the legal system, and the collapse of the rule of law. In addition, the armed conflict exacerbated the sexual and gender-based violence against women in Syria. However, the report emphasised that women had faced ‘violations and discrimination in law and practice’ for decades before the outbreak of the armed conflict. In addition, the Government took very few steps to end gender-based discrimination and violence against women or to improve the situation of women in the country.²¹

According to SNHR, Syrian women and girls have been subjected to different types of violations such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, executions, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, forced displacement, siege warfare, and denial of healthcare and basic services. SNHR observed that Syrian women and girls have been directly and deliberately targeted by all parties to the conflict, Government forces being the primary, the ‘most prolific’ and the ‘most brutal’ perpetrator of violations targeting women.²² Between March 2011 and 25 November 2019, SNHR documented 28 076 deaths of women and girls, with the Government forces being responsible for almost 78 % (21 856) of these extrajudicial killings. A total of 90 women reportedly died due to torture, 72 of them at the hands of Government forces. In addition, ‘at least 10 363 women and girls are still detained or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the main parties to the conflict’. In more than 81 % of these cases (8 412) Government forces were the perpetrators.²³ SNHR further noted that, in 2019, Syrian women and girls continued to face ‘all the types of violations’ that were reported during previous years.²⁴

The CoI report published on 15 August 2019 pointed out that both direct physical violence and indirect violence – suffered for example as a result of damaged or destroyed infrastructure – had affected women in an ‘amplified’ way. The report noted that ‘[g]ender roles, and the inequalities that underpin them, have fuelled and amplified the impact of [conflict-related] violations, inflicting multifaceted harms upon survivors, thereby shaping differently their negative experiences.’ The report added that ‘although gendered harms clearly encompass physical and bodily harm, they often also encompass unacknowledged harm, including distinctive socio-economic and moral harms, which impact negatively the exercise of a broad range of human rights.’²⁵

The ‘gendered harms’ discussed in the CoI report of August 2019 can be illustrated with reports by other authoritative sources.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the consequences of the war for Syrian women have been ‘particularly brutal’.²⁶ An August 2018 Humanitarian Update published by UN Women stated that the protracted humanitarian crisis caused by the war had ‘devastating

¹⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²⁰ These other organisations include Badael Foundation, BIHAR Relief Organization, Center for Civil Society and Democracy, Dawlaty, Musawa - Women’s Study Center, Syrian Female Journalists Network, Syrian League for Citizenship, Urnammu, and Women Now for Development.

²¹ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 5

²² SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), pp.1, 2

²³ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 5–7

²⁴ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17. In the report, these different types of harms are discussed in the context of damage and destruction suffered by the communities in the rebel-held Idlib enclave (see [section 3.1](#))

²⁶ ICRC, Syrian women, n.d., [url](#)

consequences for women and girls’ and how, ‘[f]rom food insecurity to loss of educational opportunities, lack of safe water or health services, and high rates of gender-based violence, women and girls are facing the brunt of the crisis.’²⁷ ICRC noted that women ‘tend to be the ones who sustain the resilience of families and communities, trying to keep their families healthy, fed and together. In many cases, they have become the sole breadwinners overnight, after losing husbands and fathers to the conflict.’²⁸

The UNPFA Voices from Syria report of November 2017 noted that women and girls have been exposed to general risks related to Syria’s war and humanitarian crisis including, amongst other things, shelling, destruction of infrastructure and displacement. In addition, women have been exposed to additional risks, such as domestic (and family) violence, by ‘the cultural norms that give women an inferior status compared to men’. At the same time women are provided with fewer freedoms to protect themselves and their families. The report described how women are targeted with specific types of violence and exploitation ‘simply because they are women’. It further stated that women are facing violence perpetrated not just by armed groups but also by ‘everyday men in their lives’ including husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and neighbours.²⁹

A World Bank report published in February 2019 stated that ‘Syrian women face greater risks in access to livelihoods as well as personal and family security.’ In particular, it is estimated that women’s already legally restricted mobility has been further affected by rising concerns for safety and honour in the existing fragile and conflict-affected environment. The World Bank identified the situation as particularly challenging since the conflict-affected environment also ‘requires women to access services and markets or support systems at a greater rate than prior to the conflict since men mostly engage outside the home, are on the frontlines, or have become victims of armed conflict’.³⁰

In a report published in March 2016, CARE³¹ pointed out that, in areas of active conflict, widespread and indiscriminate violence – such as aerial bombardment and shelling – was the main factor causing risks to women’s livelihoods and any activity in the public sphere. In addition, women living close to the front lines or in hard-to-reach or besieged areas were at risk of being arrested, harassed and targeted with sexual violence at checkpoints or accused of collaborating with the enemy while crossing front lines.³²

The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) report of November 2016, noted how siege warfare³³ has impacted women severely and disproportionately, for example by limiting their access to health care and adding additional burdens to their daily responsibilities.³⁴ Likewise, the use of explosive weapons hindered their access to medical care, also in cases where pregnant women were at risk of losing their lives or the lives of their unborn children without access to emergency medical assistance.³⁵

According to the UNPFA Voices from Syria report of November 2017, the length of the Syrian conflict, ‘the deep-rooted patriarchal structures underpinning Syrian society’, and the increasingly lawless situation in some parts of the country were normalising gender-based violence while the eroding of

²⁷ UN Women, Crisis update: Women of Syria, eight years into the crisis, 13 August 2018, [url](#)

²⁸ ICRC, Syrian women, n.d., [url](#)

²⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 20

³⁰ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 77–78

³¹ CARE is an international NGO with a focus on fighting poverty.

³² CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 28

³³ Siege warfare was used between 2011 and mid-2018, by different parties to the conflict, although mainly by the Government forces, in order to punish Syrian civilians living in the areas of their opponents. By mid-2018, all major areas besieged by the Government forces had been recaptured and the long-term sieges of Fuaa and Kefraya by non-state armed groups had ended in forced population transfers, which marked the end of the period of major siege warfare. See, PAX, Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria’s Sieges, 6 March 2019, [url](#)

³⁴ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 24

³⁵ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 16

women’s rights continued. The report depicted a situation where there were ‘very few spaces [in Syria] where women and girls feel safe’.³⁶ The situation was described as a state of chaos where there had been a breakdown of protection services such as police or courts and a dismantling of social structures and protection mechanisms available before the conflict. In this state, people could reportedly ‘do what they want without facing consequences’.³⁷

According to the Col report of 15 August 2019, Syrian civilians – including women, men, and children – have endured persecution in Government-controlled areas in the form of arbitrary arrests, detentions, harassment, mistreatment and torture. Recent returnees have also reportedly been targeted.³⁸ The Col estimated that the situation varies in different areas of Syria with regard to the rule of law. In general, Syrian citizens reportedly feel unsafe and unprotected by the Syrian state. They are also prone to abduction, either for ransom or for political gain, as well as extortion and acts of retribution. The Col added that people in detention risk ill-treatment and sometimes execution. There is reportedly also ‘little recourse to justice’ available for those Syrians who have lost their livelihoods or their properties.³⁹

The SNHR report of 25 November 2019 noted that the Government of Syria has targeted women and girls basically on two grounds. According to SNHR, in some cases, women have been targeted because of their active contribution to humanitarian, social, and political activities. In other cases, women and girls have been targeted simply because of their gender as a part of the Government’s effort to break and marginalise these women and suppress and intimidate the wider Syrian society. This suppression is connected to traditional customs and beliefs still strongly affecting the role of women in Syrian society.⁴⁰

International human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch have reported cases of Government forces targeting female activists since the early phases of the conflict.⁴¹ For example, in July 2014, Human Rights Watch noted that Syrian women taking part in demonstrations and civilian assistance had been targeted with abuse, harassment, and detention by the Government forces and, occasionally, by non-state armed groups opposed to the Government in a similar manner as their male counterparts.⁴² According to the SNHR report of 25 November 2019, the ‘relentless’ targeting of women by the Government of Syria is meant to send an ‘intimidating message’ to Syrian society, which aims to show that the Government forces do not differentiate between their targets on the basis of their age or gender, and that the Government is not bound by the international law or the communal ‘customs or conventions’ and is, therefore, willing to attack ‘the most vulnerable members of [Syrian] society’.⁴³

1.1.2 Sexual and gender-based violence by the Government forces

Sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war

According to the SNHR report of 25 November 2019, the Government of Syria has ‘used sexual violence as a strategic weapon of war’ when targeting Syrian women solely on the basis of their gender. This practice has reportedly aimed at ‘destroying the social fabric’ of Syrian society.⁴⁴

³⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 8

³⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 33

³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁰ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁴¹ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists, 24 June 2013, [url](#)

⁴² Human Rights Watch, “We Are Still Here.” Women on the Front Lines of Syria’s Conflict, 2 July 2014, [url](#)

⁴³ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁴⁴ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 14

In a report on sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic published by HRC on 8 March 2018, the CoI stated that '[s]exual and gender-based violence against women, girls, men, and boys has been a persistent issue in Syria since the uprising in 2011.'⁴⁵ The CoI observed that, in 2018, multiple forms of sexual and gender-based violence – including rape, sexual assault, sexual torture and sexual humiliation – were 'documented in virtually every Syrian governorate'.⁴⁶ The CoI report stated that different parties to the conflict have resorted to sexual violence as 'a tool to instil fear, humiliate and punish'.⁴⁷ The WILPF report of November 2016 stated that, during the civil war, Syrian women have been targeted with various forms of sexual and gender-based violence and human rights violations by Government forces and by 'some armed factions' (non-state armed groups).⁴⁸ However, the CoI reported that sexual violence targeting women is considerably more common among Government forces and associated pro-government armed groups than among non-state armed groups.⁴⁹

According to researcher Marie Forestier, Syrian Government forces used sexual violence, and especially rape, as a tactic of war in their fight against forces opposing the rule of president Bashar al-Assad.⁵⁰ In the report of March 2018, the CoI estimated that rape and other acts of sexual violence carried out by the Government forces and pro-government militias after February 2012 during ground operations, house raids, at checkpoints, and during detention, 'formed part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, and amount to crimes against humanity', in addition to being classified as war crimes. According to the CoI, Syrian Government forces and associated pro-government militias have used sexual violence against women and girls and occasionally men as punishment, to extract both forced confessions and information, and to terrorise communities opposing the Government. In addition, women and girls in detention have been 'subjected to invasive and humiliating searches and raped, sometimes gang-raped, while male detainees were most commonly raped with objects and sometimes subjected to genital mutilation'.⁵¹

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) report published in January 2019 and based on interviews from Syrian survivors of sexual violence and sexual humiliation stated that, throughout the conflict, security forces of the Syrian Government have operated with impunity. In addition, the report noted that the widespread practice of arbitrary detention and torture is still used, which makes men, women, and children vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and other serious violations of international law 'on a daily basis'.⁵²

Sexual violence in ground operations, during house raids, and at checkpoints

The CoI noted in its report of March 2018 that, at the outset of the 2011 uprising, sexual and gender-based violence by Government forces occurred during house raids targeting protestors and, soon after, during ground operations aiming to retain or re-establish Government control over opposition areas.⁵³ The CoI stated that in 2011 'it was still relatively common for women to not be searched at

⁴⁵ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁸ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁹ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁰ Forestier, M., 'You want freedom? This is your freedom': Rape as a tactic of the Assad regime, LSE, March 2017, [url](#), p. 1, *passim*

⁵¹ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁵² SJAC, 'Do you know what happens here?' An Analysis of Survivor Accounts of SGBV in Syria, January 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵³ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 5–6

checkpoints.’ However, as the conflict escalated the Government changed the practice and reports on cases of sexual violence (rape and other forms of sexual violence) targeting women and girls at Government checkpoints started to appear.⁵⁴

The CoI stated that Syrian Government forces utilised sexual violence, along with killings and looting, to instil fear and cause ‘maximum terror and humiliation to the population’ during house raids, carried out mainly between 2011 and 2015, with most raids conducted before August 2012. Women and girls were the primary targets of sexual violence, with violence mainly taking the form of rapes and gang-rapes and with additional forms of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse sometimes involved.⁵⁵ The CoI pointed out that sexual violence perpetrated by the Government forces has been regularly connected to other types of violence and killings: ‘Women and girls who were raped often witnessed the killing of male relatives, and in several instances eyewitnesses recalled women and girls being killed after being raped. Women and girls who tried to resist sexual assault and those who tried to prevent it were severely beaten or killed.’⁵⁶

The CoI observed that, after the focus of the Government’s military tactics shifted from ground operations to airstrikes and the direct confrontations between the Government and opposition forces decreased, most sexual and gender-based violations by Government forces were reported to occur either at checkpoints or in detention.⁵⁷ Between 2011 and 2014, the CoI confirmed cases of sexual violence or sexual abuse being committed during house raids in Damascus, Dara’a, Deir ez-Zour, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia and Rif Dimashq governorates. However, the cases are said to form ‘a pattern observed countrywide’.⁵⁸ The CoI has not been able to confirm allegations of rape being used in the more recent ground operations (carried out in 2016 or afterwards). However, it expressed extreme concern that the widespread use of pro-government militias (involving both native Syrians and foreigners) in operations such as the retaking of eastern Aleppo city in late 2016 is an additional factor increasing the likelihood of sexual and gender-based violations occurring during these operations.⁵⁹

The CoI report of March 2018 contained information on reported cases of sexual violence at checkpoints between 2011 and 2016, with the majority of incidents taking place in 2012 and 2013. Governorates mentioned in the report include Damascus, Dara’a, Hama and Homs. The prominence of these early years of the conflict was explained in the report by ‘greater movements of populations in areas with Government or pro-Government checkpoints’.⁶⁰

SJAC described an undated case of sexual violence at a checkpoint in Homs, in which a group of families was stopped at gunpoint, children were separated from their families, men were then executed, and women raped for two days by multiple perpetrators.⁶¹ In a first-hand testimony collected by author and activist Samar Yazbek from October 2013, a woman working as a volunteer in a hospital in Aleppo was stopped and detained at a checkpoint by both male and female members of a pro-government militia (*shabbiha*) and raped multiple times.⁶² In a case reported by Anadolu Agency

⁵⁴ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 8

⁵⁵ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 7

⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁸ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁵⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 7

⁶⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 8

⁶¹ SJAC, ‘Do you know what happens here?’ An Analysis of Survivor Accounts of SGBV in Syria, January 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁶² Yazbek, S. (ed.), *Tisa' 'ashara imra'a. Suriyat yarwin*, Manshurat al-Mutawassit, 2018, pp. 77–78

journalist Meryem Goktas, a woman working as a pharmacist in eastern Ghouta was arrested by the Government forces at a checkpoint in May 2018 and detained for 9 months. The woman was reportedly threatened with rape and subjected to torture and to cruel and degrading treatment during detention.⁶³

Sexual violence in detention

As already discussed above, those Syrian women that have actively participated in the Syrian uprising and civilian assistance during the ensuing conflict have been targeted with human rights violations by the Government forces and also, at times, by non-state armed groups opposed to the Government in a similar manner as their male counterparts.⁶⁴ According to the Col, between 2011 and December 2017, ‘thousands of women and girls were [...] apprehended, including female lawyers, journalists, and activists expressing anti-Government sentiments.’ The Col stated that ‘[l]arge number of female relatives of men perceived to be opposition supporters, or suspected of belonging to armed groups, were also arbitrarily detained’ as were ‘[f]emale relatives of defectors, protestors, and providers of medical care and food to members of the opposition’.⁶⁵ Many women and girls were arrested as a way to put pressure on their male relatives to surrender.⁶⁶ Arrests were carried out in both public and private settings by forces of the Syrian Government, including the pro-government armed militias.⁶⁷

The Col report on sexual and gender-based violence from March 2018 noted that ‘[f]rom the moment of arrest and throughout detention, many women and girls were subjected to different types of sexual violence, including rape, sexual torture, sexual abuse, and humiliation.’⁶⁸ Based on cases reported between 2011 and 2016, the Col report documented how rape of women and girls or of men and boys has been reported in tens of different Syrian political and military intelligence service branches, located in Aleppo, Damascus, Dara’a, Deir ez-Zour, Hama, Hasakah, Homs, Latakia, Quneitra, and Tartous governorates.⁶⁹

According to the report by SJAC from January 2019 documenting the experiences of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, the ‘vast majority’ of people interviewed reported acts of sexual and gender-based violence occurring in Syrian Government detention centres, where they had been often detained arbitrarily.⁷⁰ The types of sexual and gender-based violence suffered while in detention include rape, strip searches and forced nudity, other acts of sexual violence, the threat of sexual violence, torture of sexual organs, violation of reproductive rights and medical care and other degrading and humiliating treatment.⁷¹

Sexual violence against children

The Col report of March 2018 noted that different parties to the conflict have perpetrated sexual violence against children, both boys and girls, with girls as young as nine having been raped during ground operations. The report noted how children of both sexes have been raped also in detention.

⁶³ Goktas, M., Syrian woman recalls regime jail torture, rape threats, Anadolu Agency, 26 June 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁴ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, “We Are Still Here.” Women on the Front Lines of Syria’s Conflict, 2 July 2014, [url](#)

⁶⁵ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁶ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 7

⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁸ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 10, 11–12

⁷⁰ SJAC, “Do you know what happens here?” An Analysis of Survivor Accounts of SGBV in Syri, January 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁷¹ SJAC, “Do you know what happens here?” An Analysis of Survivor Accounts of SGBV in Syri, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 8–10

In addition, it was noted that, in cases where both children and their parents have been detained, children have been exposed to sexual violence and other forms of torture suffered by their parents.⁷²

In a report published by Zero Impunity (originally in French by Mediapart) in July 2017, Cécile Andrzejewski and Leïla Miñano stated that Government forces used child rape as ‘a weapon of war’ and were systematically abusing the children of opposition figures in Government prisons, checkpoints and during house raids in ‘total and utter impunity’. Sexual violence against children was described as ‘the ultimate taboo’ in Syrian society, which made measuring the extent of its role in the conflict difficult. Children have been reportedly subjected to rape, threats of sexual violence, simulations, sexual mutilations, and the electrocution of genital organs. However, exact numbers are not available. In one exemplary case described in the report, ‘Nora’, an 11-year-old daughter of a suspected opposition member was taken hostage near Dara’a city in 2011 by the Government forces to pressure her father to surrender. The girl was held for 45 days and raped while in detention in spite of the fact that her father surrendered to the Military Intelligence the day following her abduction. Andrzejewski and Miñano noted that ‘Nora’, as well as other underage victims, was targeted and abducted because the Government of Syria considered her father a ‘terrorist’.⁷³

A former general and director of Aleppo’s civilian prison, interviewed by Andrzejewski and Miñano, stated that the Government had ‘a clear policy’ on detained children since spring 2011, according to which it did not differentiate between minors and adults when dealing with protesters. In this policy, children were detained with adults and exposed to exploitation, violence, sexual violence perpetrated by prison guards, torturers and other prisoners. Another officer interviewed by Andrzejewski and Miñano, a lieutenant responsible for one of the Military Intelligence Directorate’s detention centres, confirmed the policy described above in which Government forces made no distinction between adults and minors in detention, even in cases where torture was involved.⁷⁴

A similar policy of non-differentiation, where the Government forces targeting persons perceived to be opposing the government do not differentiate on the basis of age or gender, was described by the SNHR report of 25 November 2019 (discussed in [Section 2.1.1](#) above).

1.1.3 Types of sexual and gender-based violence against women in Syria

The WILPF report of November 2016 noted that sexual and gender-based violence in Syria has been prevalent in both public and private spheres for decades. However, the armed conflict has reportedly exacerbated the situation.⁷⁵ A World Bank report of February 2019 noted that, because of the conflict, ‘cases of domestic violence, rape (including marital rape), forced marriage to armed group fighters, trafficking, and sexual enslavement have all increased in scale and scope.’ The World Bank identified the fear caused by sexual violence and its possible consequences as ‘one of the leading causes of displacement in Syria’.⁷⁶

The UNPFA report of March 2019 pointed out that women and girls are ‘disproportionately affected by gender-based violence in Syria as in any other country in conflict’.⁷⁷ The report noted that, as a result of conflict and displacement, women and girls in Syria are affected by ‘the increasingly complex web of violence’ in every part of their lives. The report noted how different forms of sexual and gender-based violence, the omnipresent fear of sexual violence, and other challenges and abuses associated with these types of violence are ‘significantly interlinked’.⁷⁸

⁷² UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 21

⁷³ Zero Impunity, How The Assad Regime Used Child Rape as a Weapon of War, [url](#)

⁷⁴ Zero Impunity, How The Assad Regime Used Child Rape as a Weapon of War, [url](#)

⁷⁵ WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 7

⁷⁶ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁷⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁷⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

The UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019 listed different forms of sexual and gender-based violence that continue to ‘pervade’ the lives of women and girls in Syria inside and outside their homes.⁷⁹ The UNPFA report of November 2017 emphasised the role of the fear of sexual violence and sexual harassment in the everyday lives of Syrian women and girls.⁸⁰ The UNPFA report of 2019 stated (based on different types of information gathered in 2018) that ‘the forms of violence that are the most common in Syria are sexual violence, domestic violence, and early/forced marriage’ with the category of sexual violence including subcategories of rape, sexual harassment and sexual abuse. The report indicated that the situation has remained similar for several years. In addition, the report noted the role of the fear of sexual violence as one reason for different forms of movement restrictions set for women and girls, either self-imposed or by their family members.⁸¹

The UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019 contain governorate-level estimates of risks posed by different forms of sexual and gender-based violence to women and girls in different governorates. These estimates are based on expert opinions and focus group discussions involving local residents. On the basis of the more comprehensive estimates from the November 2017 report, the drafter of the current EASO report assessed⁸² that the risk of most common types of sexual and gender-based violence – namely sexual violence, domestic and/or family violence, and child marriages – and associated restrictions to freedom of movement were reported in all governorates.⁸³ In the March 2019 report, it was explicitly stated that, on the basis of focus group discussions, different types of sexual and gender-based violence occur ‘essentially everywhere in Syria’.⁸⁴ The March 2019 report is more limited than the November 2017 report with regard to available data.⁸⁵ Despite this limitation, the risk of the most common types of sexual and gender-based violence mentioned above was reported in every governorate discussed in detail⁸⁶ in the 2019 report.⁸⁷

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, factors related to the armed conflict and increasing the risk of exposure to sexual and gender-based violence include: the prevailing lawlessness, displacement, and the resulted overcrowding and mixing of men and women, poverty and unemployment and the psychosocial consequences of the conflict.⁸⁸ The CoI report of 15 August 2019 observed that the Syrian conflict has displaced approximately 13 million civilians with 6.2 million of them internally displaced persons (IDP). The report stated that women and children form the majority of those displaced with displaced women and girls facing a heightened risk of exploitation and abuse. In addition, displacement is said to amplify pre-existing gender inequalities and exacerbate different types of gender-specific harms.⁸⁹

⁷⁹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 8; UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁸⁰ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁸¹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 11 (for movement restrictions), 20 (the most common forms of sexual violence), 25–27 (subcategories)

⁸² Assessment by the drafter (Finnish Immigration Service)

⁸³ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 84–145. Deir ez-Zour region is the only exception where only the risks of domestic violence and child marriages were reported. It is the view of the drafter (Finnish Immigration Service) that this region is left, to a certain extent, underreported by UNPFA. See UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 102–103

⁸⁴ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 25

⁸⁵ These data limitations are discussed in the report which states that the distribution of focus group discussions is not representative of the whole country with many discussions taking place in Idlib. UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 16. It is also important to note that the situation of Dar’aa and Quneitra governorates is not analysed in the report at all.

⁸⁶ The drafter, Finnish Immigration Service, estimates that the governorates of Deir ez-Zour and Tartous are underreported in the UNPFA report from March 2019. This estimation is based on the fact that the forms of sexual and gender-based violence documented in these governorates are discussed in a more limited manner compared to other governorates analysed in the report. For relevant sections, see UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 65–66, 78–79

⁸⁷ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 52–53 (Aleppo), 54–55 (Hasakeh), 57–58 (Raqqqa), 61–62 (Sweida), 63–64 (Damascus), 67–68 (Hama), 69–70 (Homs), 71–72 (Idlib), 75 (Latakia), 77 (Rif Dimashq)

⁸⁸ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 34–35

⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 14

Displacement exposes women and girls to locations deemed as unsafe for example checkpoints, although there are reportedly very few other places that women and girls consider as safe and free from sexual and gender-based violence, with places related to their daily activities, such as markets, the workplace and the street, deemed as unsafe. In addition, displacement can lead to separation of families, disrupts social support networks, and causes a loss of assets and employment that leads to increasing economic pressure. Poverty and unemployment can lead to additional vulnerability particularly in the case of female-headed households and especially those headed by widows and divorcees. Together, displacement, poverty and unemployment create a level of pressure, particularly for men, who may feel that their culturally seminal role of household provider is under threat, which in turn increases the risk of domestic and/or family violence.⁹⁰

Sexual violence (rape, sexual harassment, sexual abuse)

According to a report by Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR)⁹¹ dated October 2018, based on reporting by Syrian first responders, sexual violence in the form of rape ‘was limited to individual cases’ before the 2011 uprising. The perception was that it was a violation perpetrated by ‘relatives, neighbours, co-workers or drug and alcohol addicts’. The situation changed after the outbreak of the conflict, when it became ‘widely used’ as ‘a weapon of war’ by the Government forces in the context of detention, checkpoints and house raids to break ‘the will of the people’ and destabilise Syrian communities (see above [Section 2.1.2](#)).⁹² According to EuroMedRights⁹³ report of November 2017, the number of cases of marital rape has been increasing because of the conflict.⁹⁴

The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that many Syrian women and girls fear rape and sexual assault on a daily basis, with girls as young as 13 reportedly exposed to this type of violence. Camps (for internally displaced persons) were reportedly considered as particularly dangerous for women in this respect.⁹⁵ In the UNPFA report of November 2017, those women and girls living in displacement or in camps were said to be living in ‘particularly unsafe environments’ and in ‘places where the risks for sexual violence were high’. This was because of factors such as ‘a lack of privacy, overcrowding and mix of people who do not know each other, poverty and financial desperation, and chaos or lawlessness’.⁹⁶ For example, the CoI report of 15 August 2019 described how the displaced women and girls living in Rukban camp have been disproportionately affected by ‘rampant sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation’.⁹⁷

The World Bank report of February 2019 pointed out that Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network data from 2013 indicates a ‘major surge’ in reported cases of rape against women with an increase from 300 in 2011 to 6 000 in 2013. The World Bank assumed that these are only the reported and known cases and that there are likely more cases than those actually reported.⁹⁸ The United States Department of State (USDoS) noted that reports by UN organisations (including reports by the UNPFA), NGOs, and the media depict rape and sexual violence as ‘endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country’ and that, according to humanitarian organisations, Syrians identify sexual violence as a primary reason for them to leave the country.⁹⁹ The CoI report published on

⁹⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 34, 35

⁹¹ Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR) is a Syrian NGO focusing on human rights.

⁹² LDHR, Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities, October 2018, [url](#), pp. 22–23

⁹³ EuroMedRights is a NGO focusing on issues concerning human rights and development and based on partnerships between NGO’s in the Euro-Mediterranean region. [url](#)

⁹⁴ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 2

⁹⁵ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 26

⁹⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 9

⁹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁹⁸ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 78

⁹⁹ USDoS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 58

15 August 2019 stated that, between January and early July 2019 ‘rape and other forms of sexual violence [related to the conflict] continued to occur.’¹⁰⁰

The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that sexual harassment consisting of ‘shouts, insults, threats, groping and other forms of street harassment’ poses a daily nuisance and contributes to fear of sexual violence that often develops into ‘a barrier that prohibits women and girls from leaving their homes.’ According to the report, sexual harassment can be perpetrated by ‘men of any age, even boys, as well as by neighbours and family members’ but is defined as ‘particularly frightening’ when perpetrated either by taxi or bus drivers or by those linked to armed groups, posing the additional risk of abduction. In addition, UNPFA noted that the passivity of bystanders witnessing the harassment also encourages a culture of silence among the victims.¹⁰¹

According to the EuroMedRights report of November 2017, ‘certain articles in the [Syrian] Criminal Code’ criminalise sexual harassment. However, women suffering harassment ‘rarely seek justice through the legal system’ because of the shame and stigma imposed on the victims and their families in the context of patriarchal values prevalent in the society.¹⁰²

Abduction

The risk of abduction of women and girls for the purpose of sexual violence was discussed by Syrians interviewed in the UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019, and especially with regard to certain governorates. In the report of November 2017, these governorates include Aleppo, Damascus, Hasakeh, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, Quneitra, and Rif Dimashq.¹⁰³ In the report of March 2019, the fear of abductions is discussed in detail with regard to governorates of Sweida, Idlib, and Rif Dimashq.¹⁰⁴

The World Bank report of February 2019 noted that forced abductions connected to sexual violence and targeting young women and girls at checkpoints have been reported to spread shame and stigma and serve as a weapon of war.¹⁰⁵ According to SNHR report of 25 November 2019, the frequency of abductions, often conducted on the basis of ethnicity, targeting women and girls has increased. SNHR noted that many cases of abduction have been motivated by the desire of the perpetrators to force the local communities to ‘acquiesce to the dominant forces in the area’.¹⁰⁶

The UNPFA report of March 2019 listed ransom, revenge, political reasons, and organ trafficking (affecting children, especially) as possible reasons for abduction in general, while pointing out that ‘women and girls face the added risk of rape and sexual assault as a motivation for, or consequence of, abduction.’¹⁰⁷ The UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that abduction of women and girls is commonly associated with rape and sexual assault (and in some cases to forced marriage).¹⁰⁸

The March 2019 report notes that most cases of abduction associated with sexual violence were reportedly cases where the abduction is motivated by rape.¹⁰⁹ Among the Syrians interviewed for the 2017 report there was a widespread sentiment that in the most extreme cases abductions of women and girls might end in homicide. The risk of abduction was associated with the unsafety of available

¹⁰⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁰¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁰² EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 66–70 (Aleppo), 76–78 (Hasakeh), 90–92 (Damascus), 108–112 (Homs), 114–118 (Idlib), 124–126 (Latakia), 128–132 (Quneitra), 136–137 (Rif Dimashq).

¹⁰⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 61–62 (Sweida), 71–72 (Idlib), 77 (Rif Dimashq)

¹⁰⁵ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 78

¹⁰⁶ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 34

¹⁰⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁰⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 34

transportation. The fear of abduction was said to be one of the main justifications for movement restrictions being set to women and girls (see [Section 2.2.5](#)).¹¹⁰

Domestic violence/family violence

According to researchers Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, domestic violence was common in Syria even before the civil war and it was not criminalised in Syrian legislation.¹¹¹ According to the USDoS Human Rights Report of March 2019, in Syria, the law ‘does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, but it stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom’.¹¹² Kelly and Breslin pointed out that ‘spousal rape is excluded as a punishable offense under the legal definition of rape.’¹¹³ EuroMedRights report of November 2017 stated that marital rape is ‘completely ignored’ in the Syrian legal system and the number of cases is reportedly increasing because of the ongoing conflict.¹¹⁴ Before the war, women reportedly had little possibility of redress with families discouraging them from making official complaints, and the police estimated as unsympathetic to victims of domestic violence and eager to reconcile the husband and wife.¹¹⁵

UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019 noted that, in Syria, domestic violence is often normalised and ingrained in culture and/or social norms.¹¹⁶ Family violence is often closely linked with domestic violence, with violence perpetrated by other family members such as in-laws and in particular the husband’s brother(s).¹¹⁷ The report noted how domestic violence ‘often occurs together with physical, emotional or verbal violence, sexual violence and economic violence’.¹¹⁸ According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, the impact of domestic violence is amplified in times of crisis, which reportedly increases women’s vulnerability and psychological distress suffered.¹¹⁹ The UNPFA report of November 2017 pointed out that the Syrian conflict and the humanitarian crisis that ensued have contributed to change in traditional gender roles (see [Section 2.2.1](#)), which has been connected to increase in domestic violence, with men perceiving the change in family dynamics as a threat.¹²⁰

For example, the UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that the increasing number of women working outside the house and contributing to the family’s income and the resulting change in family dynamics, has, according to Syrians interviewed for the report, led to an increase in domestic violence, since men interpret this social change as ‘a threat to the traditional balance of power’.¹²¹ In addition, WILPF reported how Syria’s protracted conflict has led to proliferation of small arms which, in turn, increases the risk of domestic violence and the likelihood of spousal violence turning into murder.¹²²

A research paper by Andrew Simon-Butler and Bernadette McSherry analysed the prevalence of intimate partner violence within the Syrian refugee context. The paper noted how ‘the changes in lifestyle and mobility caused by the conflict’ has redistributed power among Syrians refugees and challenged the traditional way of family life (with its traditional gender norms). Based on previous research on Syrian refugees in Lebanon by Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman from 2013, Simon-Butler and McSherry claimed that, in many cases, the change in traditional way of family life has led to ‘hyper

¹¹⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 32

¹¹¹ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 58. See also LoC, Syria: Women’s Rights in Light of New Amendments to Syrian Personal Status Law, 8 April 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹⁴ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹⁵ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹¹⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 25

¹¹⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹²⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 8

¹²¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 23

¹²² WILPF, Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them, November 2016, [url](#), p. 17

masculine behaviour’ and reassertion of ‘patriarchal roles’ among Syrian men. In turn, this has often led to violence against women and children.¹²³

The UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that women and girls in Syria are often ‘especially reluctant’ to seek out services for victims of gender-based violence and they are therefore dealing with its consequences in isolation.¹²⁴ The World Bank report of February 2019 stated that there are still ‘no effective legal protections against domestic violence or criminalization of marital rape or rape and limited-to-no mechanisms available for women to file complaints.’ Although the World Bank documented the opening of the first official shelter for female victims of domestic violence in 2008, there is still a lack of services to support survivors of domestic violence.¹²⁵

USDoS stated that although several domestic violence centres have operated in Damascus, local non-governmental organisations state that many centres are no longer in operation due to the conflict and there are ‘no known government-run services for women outside Damascus’.¹²⁶ EuroMedRights report of November 2017 confirms this assessment while stating that there are only three shelters for women survivors of domestic violence in Syria, all of them operating in Damascus.¹²⁷

‘Honour’ violence

Already in 2012, WILPF noted that in Syria’s highly militarised society and in the context of the international arms trade, economic interests and massive use of weapons against civilians, ‘there is an alarming number of women and girls facing the devastating consequences of acts performed in the name of “honour”’. WILPF described ‘honour’ killings as ‘silent’ crimes that are reportedly ‘becoming the most crucial security threat to women and girls’ and are ‘hidden under the rubric of culture and tradition.’ WILPF identified raped women and girls as the victims of ‘honour’ violence and their family members as the perpetrators of violence.¹²⁸

‘Honour’ is still a mitigating factor in the eyes of Syria’s criminal law.¹²⁹ In 2009 Human Rights Watch reported on the abolishment of Article 548 of the Penal Code. The article reportedly waived punishment for a man found to have killed a female family member in a case ‘provoked’ by ‘illegitimate sex acts,’ as well as for a husband who killed his wife because of an extramarital affair. In addition, the article lowered penalties if a killing was based on a ‘suspicious state’ concerning a female family member. However, the article that replaced Article 548 reportedly still allows for mitigated punishment for ‘honour’ killings; while setting the minimum sentence for the crime to two years in prison.¹³⁰ In addition, Human Rights Watch noted that Article 242 of the Penal Code allows a judge to reduce the punishment for both men and women in the case when a murder is committed in rage and motivated by an illegal act provoked by the victim, with extra-marital affairs being illegal in Syria.¹³¹

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, most cases of ‘honour’ killings are connected to sexual violence but not necessarily rape. The report noted that ‘honour’ killings can be a reaction to street harassment or assault, to assumed sexual violence during abduction and even to an autonomous decision made by a girl concerning whom and when to marry. The report noted that so-called honour

¹²³ Simon-Butler, A. & McSherry, B., Defining Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Refugee context, 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 23

¹²⁵ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 78–79

¹²⁶ As a sidenote, USDOS states that, in areas controlled by the armed opposition-groups, Local Coordination Committees and other groups related to the Syrian opposition have reportedly offered programs specifically for protection of women although these programs have not been integrated throughout the country and there has been no reliable funding reported. USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 59

¹²⁷ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 5

¹²⁸ WILPF, Statement: ‘Honour Crimes’ in Syria, 6 November 2012, [url](#)

¹²⁹ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 1–2; Human Rights Watch, Syria: No Exceptions for ‘Honor Killings’, 28 July 2009, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch, Syria: No Exceptions for ‘Honor Killings’, 28 July 2009, [url](#)

¹³¹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 59

killings are also ‘publicly shared through social media to demonstrate the cleansing of the family’s “shame” and, possibly, as a tactic to ensure future “shameful” acts are not imitated’.¹³²

Syria’s Head of the Criminal Division of the Court of Cassation reported a fourfold increase in cases of ‘honour’ killings in 2016 compared to the number of cases before the 2011 uprising, although it was reportedly not possible to gather comprehensive statistics on this issue.¹³³ Some Syrians interviewed for the March 2019 UNPFA report claimed that ‘honour’ killings had increased after the outbreak of the war because of increases in both sexual violence and general lawlessness, while some sources ‘insinuated a reduction in the social acceptance of the practice’.¹³⁴

Forced and early marriages (child marriages)

Researchers Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin stated that early marriages were reportedly fairly common before the outbreak of the civil war.¹³⁵ According to Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of civil society organisations devoted to ending child marriage, the most recent data available provided by UNICEF (from 2006) display how 13 % of Syrian girls were married before the age of 18 and 3 % before reaching the age of 15. Child marriage is reported as being most common in governorates of Dara’a, Rif Dimashq, and Quneitra, where 26, 25, and 23 % of girls were married before reaching the age of 18 (respectively).¹³⁶

The LDHR report of October 2018 stated that in 2015 the rate of child marriages had reached 32 % due to the crisis affecting Syria, without any further elaboration of this assessment.¹³⁷ The World Bank report of February 2019 noted that, as a response to the protracted conflict, many Syrian families ‘are resorting to negative coping mechanisms that have specific implications for women and girls’, with the most frequent coping mechanism, after relying on aid and NGO support, being child marriages.¹³⁸ The World Bank noted a huge increase in the share of marriages among female minors (from 7 to around 30 % between 2011 and 2015). In addition, the World Bank estimated that 60 % of child marriages remain unreported.¹³⁹ The Col report of 15 August 2019 named ‘rapidly increasing instances of child marriage’ as one of the negative coping mechanisms to alleviate the financial burden caused by the conflict.¹⁴⁰

According to Girls Not Brides, the practice of child marriage is based on factors such as gender inequality and the belief in the inferiority of girls compared to boys. In addition, factors particular to Syria include traditional customs that prevailed even before the 2011 uprising, the mass displacement of millions of refugees, and the trafficking of girls in (refugee) camps.¹⁴¹

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, as a practice intertwined in culture and tradition and ‘associated with the belief that women need protection by men’, ‘marriage of children under 18 years old is not a new phenomenon in Syria’. However, it was also stated that the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict has ‘influenced the nature of child marriage to put a heavier impact on girls’.¹⁴² The report stated that families arranged marriages for girls, believing it would provide protection for these girls as well as ease the financial burden on the family. Girls are reportedly being married

¹³² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³³ Al-Watan, Honor Killings Increased Fourfold Since Start of Syria Crisis, 5 July 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹³⁵ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 22

¹³⁶ Girls Not Brides, Syrian Arab Republic, n.d. [2018], [url](#)

¹³⁷ LDHR, Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities, October 2018, [url](#), p. 25

¹³⁸ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 78

¹³⁹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴¹ Girls Not Brides, Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁴² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 20

younger and they have been married to combatants, foreign fighters and family members, with some married to adolescent boys and others to adult men much older than their brides.¹⁴³

Besides the phenomena of exploitation and forced marriage, a gender-based violence expert interviewed for the UNPFA November 2017 report identified several other possible reasons for child marriage, including the need to seek protection, the lack of men and the worsening of the economic situation. It was also stated that child marriage might be a response to the fact that ‘women and girls in particular face sexual harassment and threats of abduction and sexual violence on a daily basis.’¹⁴⁴ The report pointed out that adolescent girls, often either pressured by cultural norms and financial needs or forced by their families, report their lack of decision-making power in this matter.¹⁴⁵ The UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that, in the traditional setting, ‘unmarried women above the age of 20 are considered “spinsters”.’¹⁴⁶

The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that, sometimes, early marriages are a result of the parents’ desire to protect their daughters, and sometimes an exit strategy adopted by the girls themselves to gain ‘greater freedom’ of managing their own household. Many early and/or forced marriages were reported to end in divorce, with the young women (possibly with children) stigmatised by the divorce. This can contribute, in turn, to further risk of gender-based violence, with the women possibly becoming also isolated and/or ostracised by their family and community and/or sexually exploited to meet daily needs.¹⁴⁷

The UNPFA report of November 2017 stated that ‘the risks of child marriage for girls are substantial’; including the heightened risk of sexually transmitted infections, enormous health risks posed for girls by early pregnancies, the risk of being forced to drop out of school and face additional restrictions of freedom and movement, the risk of domestic violence (physical, verbal or sexual), and the risk of ending up isolated from friends and family (particularly if the girl in question has entered marriage during displacement and her family moved on to a different location).¹⁴⁸ Although some parents have the understanding that child marriages protect their daughters against sexual and gender-based violence¹⁴⁹, a marriage to a much older man can actually increase the risk of these phenomena.¹⁵⁰ In addition, the Syrians interviewed for the report emphasised that child marriages often end in widowhood or divorce, with children deemed as ‘not yet mature enough to function in an adult relationship’.¹⁵¹ The threat of divorce (and the social burden and economic hardships involved) is also used by husbands as a tool to force women and adolescent girls for example to conform to customs and traditions and to work to generate revenue for their husbands.¹⁵²

UNPFA noted that child marriage and associated risks ‘can take a toll on the girls’ mental health and lead to emotional distress and depression’. It also involves ‘the missed opportunity to mature, develop independence and self-confidence before entering into marriage’. Children born from these marriages are at further risk of being abandoned by their mothers in the case of remarriage, either due to family pressure or financial necessity.¹⁵³

Sexual exploitation (survival sex, trafficking, forced prostitution)

According to the WILPF report of November 2016, human trafficking crimes have increased in Syria during the armed conflict, although official statistics on the issue are not available. Although there is

¹⁴³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 8, 20, 21

¹⁴⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁴⁵ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁴⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 22

¹⁴⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 20, 22

¹⁴⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁴⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁵⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁵² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 21

a law to protect people from trafficking, WILPF stated that the law needs to be reactivated with instructions for its implementation and additional measures to protect and rehabilitate the victims of these crimes.¹⁵⁴

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, factors such as poverty, displacement, being head of household, or being of young age and outside parental supervision ‘put women and girls in positions of reduced power’ and also increase the risk of sexual exploitation. Young girls, widows and divorced women are reportedly vulnerable because their being alone in public places exposes them to sexual exploitation and because they are in need of money and goods and forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as prostitution or survival sex. The report noted that sexual exploitation has been linked to access to humanitarian assistance.¹⁵⁵

On the basis of descriptions provided by first responders working among Syrians both inside and outside the country, the LDHR report of October 2018 listed exemplary settings of sexual exploitation. These include, inter alia, sexual exploitation of widows or wives of wounded or detained men in exchange for money, sexual exploitation of girls by managers in exchange for work, sexual exploitation by smugglers in exchange for crossing an international border.¹⁵⁶

Serial temporary marriages were mentioned by the UNPFA report of November 2017 as one specific type of sexual exploitation. In these cases, women and girls are married temporarily and repeatedly through Islamic marriage agreements which reportedly grant men ‘short-term sexual access in exchange for payment or material support under the guise of marriage’.¹⁵⁷

1.1.4 Consequences of sexual violence

The availability of services for survivors of sexual violence

According to the World Bank report of February 2019, the lack of services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and few opportunities to overcome the stigma and alienation, exacerbate the situation of victims of sexual violence. The report noted: ‘An overwhelming majority of those surveyed (70 percent) across the country agree that there is a lack of clinical care for rape survivors. Only in Damascus is that figure below 50 percent.’¹⁵⁸

The CoI report of March 2018 noted that sexual and gender-based violence affects both survivors and their families.¹⁵⁹ First of all, these acts are said to have ‘a profound and lasting impact on the physical and mental health of those who have endured [them]’. Survivors of particularly violent forms of sexual violence (rape, gang-rape and rape with objects) suffer from physical injuries that have often gone untreated either because of the lack of adequate healthcare in their area; or because treatment has been denied to them. Some have obtained treatment from abroad, including from non-governmental organisations operating outside Syria.¹⁶⁰ In addition, in many cases survivors of sexual violence are said to suffer from mental health problems and to live in a state of denial while ‘unable to safely access treatment and mental health services even if they are available.’ In extreme cases female survivors have suffered from suicidal feelings with a number of women reportedly taking their own lives after being targeted with sexual violence.¹⁶¹ On the basis of information gathered between March 2011 and

¹⁵⁴ WILPF, *Violations Against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on Them*, November 2016, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁵⁵ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 26–27

¹⁵⁶ LDHR, *Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities*, October 2018, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁵⁷ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 31

¹⁵⁸ World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 78

¹⁵⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁶¹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 5, 21 (for more on the aspect of mental health)

December 2017, the CoI estimated that the access to adequate and trusted mental health services is ‘extremely limited, particularly away from the main population centres in Syria’.¹⁶²

According to the CoI, abortion is illegal under the Syrian Penal Code¹⁶³, which places women and girls who have become pregnant as a result of rape in ‘an unenviable situation.’ The CoI noted how, in Syria, following the general criminal law principles of necessity, performing an abortion legally is possible in cases where its purpose is to save the life of the pregnant woman. In addition, the penalties stated in the law on persons performing abortions are reportedly reduced if the operation is ‘performed by the woman to save her honour or another person performs the abortion to save the honour of a descendant or a relative to the second degree.’ Those successful in seeking an abortion inside Syria have reportedly been operated by doctors who agreed to the procedure after consultations with other health practitioners. It is also possible that religious guidance is sought before the procedure. In addition, *fatwas* (or rulings on Islamic law) have been issued to allow women and girls to travel abroad to seek medical assistance.¹⁶⁴

The reaction of the family/ the community

In the CoI report of March 2018, accountability for sexual and gender-based violence was said to be nearly totally absent, perpetuating a ‘cycle of violence’ that is manifested ‘in shame and entrenching grievances within affected communities’.¹⁶⁵ The report pointed out that ‘[c]onsequences for female survivors of sexual violence range from the very real threats of divorce and excommunication from one’s family, to “honour” killings, particularly in more conservative areas. For unmarried women and girls, the prospects of a future marriage can be ruined.’¹⁶⁶ The SJAC report of January 2019, elaborating on the findings of preceding CoI reports, stated that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence ‘are not only vulnerable to serious medical complications and psychological trauma, but may also find themselves stigmatized or shunned when they attempt to return to their community’.¹⁶⁷

The UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that, ‘in addition to the health and psychosocial consequences’, survivors of sexual violence face ‘the shame and social stigma associated with women and girls’ virginity’, which is said to also ‘deeply’ influence the possible coping mechanisms available for survivors. Women and girls are reportedly afraid of their families’ reaction. Married women subjected to sexual violence may face divorce from their husbands, or husbands may take a second wife as ‘compensation’. Girls may be forced to marry the perpetrator or another man in an arrangement to cover up the ‘dishonour’.¹⁶⁸

The CoI reported on the shame felt by the victims of sexual violence. The organisation stated that women and girls ‘report feeling responsible for dishonouring their families and often conceal the abuse they endured from their relatives.’ Families knowing of the abuse are said to be sometimes supportive of survivors, while in other cases families disown their members surviving sexual violence. Relatives might blame the female victims for what happened and ‘in extreme cases refuse to have them back in the family home.’ Married women are said to be ‘often rejected by their husbands’ and therefore also separated from their children. In some cases, men reject the possibility of their children to be raised ‘by a woman whose honour is found to have been violated.’ In other cases, children

¹⁶² UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁶³ Under Articles 527-529, abortion is punishable by 6 months imprisonment for the woman, and at least a year for anyone who helps her. Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 22. The Criminal Code (in Arabic) can be found here: Syria, Syrian Penal Code, n.d. [1949, in Arabic], [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁶⁵ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶⁶ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶⁷ SJAC, ‘Do you know what happens here?’ An Analysis of Survivor Accounts of SGBV in Syria, January 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁶⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 28

accompanying a divorced woman remarrying to survive are rejected by the new husband and separated from their mother afterwards. According to the CoI, in many parts of Syrian society the concept of ‘honour’ is based on notions of female virginity before marriage and sexual fidelity while in wedlock. The CoI noted that, in this context, being raped is seen by some of its interlocutors as a fate worse than being killed. In some cases documented by CoI, victims of rape have been subjected to ‘honour’ killings by their family members (for more on ‘honour’ killings, see [Section 2.1.3](#)).¹⁶⁹

In an article published by News Deeply¹⁷⁰ in September 2017, journalists Sama Masoud and Luna Safwan claimed that ‘Syrian society does not offer a safe environment for stories [of rape] to become public’. Instead, the society normalises rape and often places blame on the victim through ‘a culture built on honour and shame’. According to Masoud and Safwan, survivors of rape are ‘often marginalised or encouraged to hide and reshape their past.’ This marginalisation makes disclosing of rape ‘all the more dangerous’ and this has led to two intertwining results. On the one hand, sexual violence has become ‘a devastatingly common and effective tactic of repression and fear’. On the other, the process of documenting cases of sexual violence has turned up to be ‘extremely challenging’. Masoud and Safwan noted that the impact of sexual assault ‘permeates nearly every facet of a woman’s life,’ and a psychotherapist interviewed in the article depicted rape as ‘the end of normal life’ for its victims. However, because of the stigma attached, victims must suffer in silence.¹⁷¹

According to researcher Marie Forestier, few survivors of sexual violence dare to speak of the issue because of the associated stigma. In Syria’s patriarchal society, with the honour of a family closely linked to that of its female members, rape and/or other forms of sexual abuse targeting women and girls is seen as bringing shame to the family and to the wider community.¹⁷² Syrian law reduces or suspends punishment in the case where the perpetrator marries the victim, which is sometimes the arrangement reached when the victim’s family wishes to avoid the social stigma attached to the offense.¹⁷³

1.2 Women in Syrian society

The CoI report of 15 August 2019 noted that women are increasingly shouldering new responsibilities beyond their traditional roles with their basic human rights simultaneously undermined by pre-established gender inequalities and the accompanied, conflict-related gender-specific harms.¹⁷⁴ This ambivalence between women’s new roles and increasing responsibilities and the simultaneous increase in sexual and gender-based violence was highlighted also in other seminal reports on this issue.¹⁷⁵ For example, the SNHR report of 25 November 2019 noted how the increasing number of female-headed households has led to women adopting new roles in addition to their customary roles (as mothers and caregivers), which is ‘subjecting them to stressful and complex living conditions that are difficult to cope with’.¹⁷⁶

According to researcher Daniel Hilton, while the Syrian war had a ‘devastating impact on women’, it has also ‘transformed women’s role in the workforce’, giving them employment opportunities that

¹⁶⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 20. See also UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 28

¹⁷⁰ News Deeply is an online newsplatform consisting of various subplatforms covering topics such as refugees, peacebuilding, and Syria, [url](#)

¹⁷¹ Masoud, Sama & Safwan, Luna, Rape: A Weapon of War With Long-Term Consequences, News Deeply, 5 September 2017, [url](#)

¹⁷² Forestier, M., ‘You want freedom? This is your freedom’: Rape as a tactic of the Assad regime, LSE, March 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁷³ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 58

¹⁷⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁵ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 8, 23; World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20; SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁷⁶ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

were previously reserved for men.¹⁷⁷ According to the CARE report of March 2016, women and adolescent girls are said to be particularly affected by Syria’s ‘ever-changing circumstances’ which ‘force them to take additional roles and responsibilities’.¹⁷⁸ According to researcher Daniel Hilton, women’s transformed role in the workforce and their additional roles and responsibilities are mainly ascribed to the increasing number of female-headed households.¹⁷⁹ According to the World Bank report published in February 2019, Syrian women face additional challenges because of their ‘increased economic responsibilities, decreased access to economic and social life, and deepening gender-based violence.’ In addition, the World Bank noted that the Syrian conflict ‘has exacerbated an already restrictive environment for women in Syria, reinforcing patriarchal traditions and attitudes’ while the number of female-headed households and women required to provide for their families have also increased.¹⁸⁰ An article from the Guardian dated May 2018, exploring the new role of women in the Idlib area, described the development as a ‘breakdown of traditional societal conventions and taboos governing what women may or may not do’.¹⁸¹

However, women ‘continue to shoulder the main responsibility for household chores’ while at the same time often being ‘responsible for providing the resources to cover basic needs’.¹⁸² In the case of the so-called Idlib enclave, the situation of women is further complicated by the dire humanitarian situation and the rule of the jihadist organisation Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (see [Section 3.1](#)).¹⁸³ Syrian women are said to be ‘exhausted to their limits’ and ‘exposed to considerable risks both inside and outside the house’.¹⁸⁴

1.2.1 Female-headed households

The CoI report published on 15 August 2019 noted that ‘female-headed households have been rapidly increasing as a result of the widespread and systematic arrest and disappearance of men and boys above the age of 15 years by primarily Government and also pro-government forces’.¹⁸⁵

The joint study by Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy and News Deeply from December 2017 noted that, in the case of Syria’s protracted war, ‘women’s economic participation is increasingly necessary as men are killed or seriously injured, leaving women as the breadwinners for their families’.¹⁸⁶ The World Bank pointed out that between 2009 and 2015 the share of female-headed households increased from 4.4 % to 12–17 % and noted that ‘more women are now required to replace disappeared, killed, or displaced males to provide for their families’.¹⁸⁷ In an article published by News Deeply in December 2017, it was estimated that women are the decision-makers and breadwinners in almost one third of Syrian households.¹⁸⁸

According to a report published by International Alert in 2017, women’s capability to act is dependent on their situation and on the place or the role of women in the particular family. The decision-making power of women over male members of the family is estimated as generally weak, with older women in the positions of family matriarchs the notable exception.¹⁸⁹ According to researchers Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, while women in general are expected to ‘exhibit a traditionally “feminine”

¹⁷⁷ Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria’s Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁹ Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria’s Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁸¹ The Guardian Amid Syria’s horror, a new force emerges: the women of Idlib, r, 26 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸² CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸³ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸⁴ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 17–18

¹⁸⁶ TIMEP/ News Deeply, Syria’s Women: Policies & Perspectives, 22 December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸⁷ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁸⁸ Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria’s Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ Khattab, L. & Myrtilinen, H., “Most of the men want to leave”. Armed groups, displacement and the gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria, July 2017, [url](#), p. 27

personality’, ‘older women often enjoy considerable influence over male family members within the household and in private settings.’¹⁹⁰

The CARE report published in March 2016 noted that as a result of the upheaval (and in the new situation defined by the lack of able men and boys) Syrian women and men reportedly feel that their roles and responsibilities have been reversed, with men losing their traditional role as sole breadwinners and decision-makers.¹⁹¹ As already discussed in the previous chapter, this reversal of roles has served as a factor increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, and especially domestic violence, targeting women.¹⁹² In addition, Human Rights Watch reported already in 2014 that the absence of men, either due to indiscriminate attacks, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, or engagement in military operations had left women vulnerable to abuse during house raids and search operations by armed groups.¹⁹³

The CARE report of March 2016 noted that in this new situation as breadwinners and possibly also heads of the family, the pressure on women, and associated psychosocial stress, is high. Female heads of household reportedly have difficulties in coping with the situation without the support of their partner. In some cases women (working and acting as breadwinners) still living with their husbands report that their spouse seeks to control their movement and activities, even while the woman needs to find new ways to generate income for the household.¹⁹⁴ CARE added that the new situation often demands that adolescent girls step in to support the household while the mother is away. In some cases adolescent girls are also forced to beg or resort to ‘survival sex’ in order to support their families.¹⁹⁵ A Synaps Network essay published in 20 September 2019 noted that social tensions arising from the altered situation are said to compound the ambivalence experienced by women in their new roles, with women questioning the sustainability of the situation and their new economic roles in the longer run. An academic interviewed by Synaps Network noted that ‘small-scale businesses run by women’ were not self-sustaining but ‘largely dependent on funding related to foreign aid programs.’ This academic added that Syrian men shared the perception that the fact that women were working ‘is out of their hands, which exacerbates tensions within families and society’.¹⁹⁶

The burdens of the new role imposed on women by the armed conflict are not limited to the need to generate income for their households. In the face of drastically cut public services, Syrian women have been forced to take on additional tasks within their families and communities and have reportedly adopted ‘a leading role in the informal humanitarian community’.¹⁹⁷ For example, CARE noted how women are taking care of the injured, the disabled, the elderly and people with other medical issues in cases where health and rehabilitation services are no longer available. Women provide health services either at their homes or serve as volunteers in improvised, clandestine health centres. In cases of limited access to education, women are compensating for the loss of education by teaching their children at home. In cases of limited access to infrastructural goods such as water or electricity, women walk long distances for water or diesel to operate their own generators. In addition, lack of basic food and non-food items is increasing women’s workload at home as tasks have become more labour intensive (e.g. women are baking bread at home when bakeries are no longer functioning).¹⁹⁸

The UNPFA report of November 2017 stated that female-headed households in particular are at increased risk of sexual violence. The risk was highlighted by Syrians interviewed for the UNPFA report in the case of girls from female-headed households.¹⁹⁹ In addition, unaccompanied girls, orphans or

¹⁹⁰ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁹¹ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 8, 23; UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 35

¹⁹³ Human Rights Watch, “We Are Still Here.” Women on the Front Lines of Syria’s Conflict, 2 July 2014, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), pp. 16–17

¹⁹⁵ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 29

¹⁹⁶ Synaps Network, War by other means. Syria’s economic struggle, 30 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), pp. 4, 15

¹⁹⁸ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁹⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 37

those living with relatives and away from their parents are reportedly at risk of sexual violence. Syrian girls interviewed for the report noted particular risks of sexual violence while on their way to or from school, and these risks are said to be often the main reason for girls to either drop out or be pulled out of school by their parents.²⁰⁰ In the UNPFA report of November 2017 the risk of sexual exploitation is most clearly associated to women and girls living in female-headed households. It is stated that '[w]omen who are heads of the household due to divorce, separation or the death of their husband, may find themselves with few options for supporting their families.' Other factors contributing to the risk of sexual exploitation include poverty, displacement, and gender inequalities. It is also stated that '[s]eparated and unaccompanied children, or those living in a female-headed household, are perceived to be at highest risk.'²⁰¹

An article published in June 2019 by Idlib Lives, a website by The Syria Campaign and Peace Direct, compiled accounts of several Syrian women who lost their close male relatives to the conflict. In the first case a young woman originally from opposition-associated parts of the Aleppo countryside, fleeing Syria to Turkey, and losing her immediate male relatives (father and brother) to the war, was forced to give up her education and deal with her husband's increasing attempts to control her actions. In the second case depicting a pattern of (attempted) forced marriage, a woman living in Raqqa was exposed to pressure from an ISIS-associated relative to remarry after her husband, her father and her only child died. In the third case a woman originally from Aleppo countryside and fleeing with her family to Lebanon decided eventually to return to Syria in the midst of the conflict after the Lebanese authorities arrested her husband on suspicion of extremist connections. In the fourth case, a widowed mother of four from opposition-held areas was arrested by Syrian security services when visiting Government-held areas. After being imprisoned for almost four years, the woman was released. While in prison the woman in question had lost her two sons to the fighting. When released, however, the woman was rejected by her community for being a former detainee and was now taking care of her remaining children, a daughter-in-law, and a grandchild, alone.²⁰²

1.2.2 Patriarchal values

Many consulted sources highlighted the role of patriarchal values, prevalent in Syrian society and affecting the situation of women and girls in many negative ways. A Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR) report of October 2018 discussed gender norms, stigma, and sexual and gender-based violence being 'intimately inter-related' phenomena, and violence and stigma as rooted in 'harmful gender and societal norms'.²⁰³ According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, women are relegated to the status of second-class citizens within Syrian families and communities which makes them vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence.²⁰⁴ In addition, UNPFA noted that disclosing sexual and gender-based violence openly is considered as shameful for both victims and their families.²⁰⁵ Researcher Marie Forestier noted that in Syria's patriarchal culture, the honour of a family is closely connected to the honour of women and girls in the family, which puts those victims of sexual and gender-based violence willing to disclose the violations at risk of stigmatisation and violence.²⁰⁶

Already before Syria's 2011 uprising, researchers Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin stated that both the authoritarian political system and patriarchal values in Syrian society left women vulnerable to gender-based violence, both inside and outside their homes.²⁰⁷ It was estimated that 'conservative customs that relegate women to a secondary position in society' were more authoritative than formal

²⁰⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 27

²⁰¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 29

²⁰² Barakat, H., Women and The Syrian Conflict, 21 June 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³ LDHR, Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities, October 2018, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 22, 26

²⁰⁵ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²⁰⁶ Forestier, M., 'You want freedom? This is your freedom': Rape as a tactic of the Assad regime, LSE, March 2017, [url](#), p. 1

²⁰⁷ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2

law to many Syrians.²⁰⁸ Women were treated as subordinate to men and it was ‘widely believed’ that ‘the most appropriate sphere for women’ was the sphere of home and family.²⁰⁹

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence was ascribed by many Syrians interviewed for the report to their ‘inherent’ weakness when compared to men, as well as to the patriarchal culture where women are targeted because of their perceived lower social status.²¹⁰ The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that ‘the complex context of Syria today feeds the notion of girls being a burden and of subordinate status.’²¹¹ In this context, adolescent girls generally deem themselves worthy of fulfilling only the most stereotypical roles like those of giving birth and taking care of the household chores. In addition, being a burden or a liability is reportedly contributing to indirect psychological and emotional violence suffered by adolescent girls.²¹²

However, these stereotypical roles are more prevalent in ‘some areas of Syria’, while in others, ‘women and girls are freer to work and to strive for jobs typically considered for men.’²¹³ The UNPFA report of March 2019 emphasised adherence to customs and traditions ‘rooted in patriarchy’ as an important basis for limiting the freedom of movement of women and girls.²¹⁴ Reportedly, Syria’s war and humanitarian crisis has ‘further entrenched patriarchal norms and customs that impede women and girl empowerment in the name of protection’, with the same norms and customs often responsible for ‘how the problem of violence against women is viewed and addressed’.²¹⁵ The report noted that discussing sexual and gender-based violence out in the open is reportedly often considered a shame for the survivors and their families, which can lead to harmful consequences for the survivors themselves, including social stigma, estrangement from the community and even ‘honour’ based violence.²¹⁶

1.2.3 Legal status and rights

According to the SNHR report of 25 November 2019, the fundamental rights of Syrian women have deteriorated severely during the conflict at every level, whether related to their security or to social, economic, health-related or psychological factors.²¹⁷ Before the 2011 uprising, Syrian women had a relatively long history of emancipation and a relatively advanced status with regard to rights of women when compared to other countries in the region.²¹⁸ However, legal reforms necessary to ensure gender equality had been very limited and it was also reported that women lacked channels through which to challenge discriminatory laws and practices.²¹⁹

In its annual Human Rights Report published in March 2019, the USDoS stated that although the Syrian constitution²²⁰ ‘provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men.’ The laws discriminating against women include criminal, family, religious, personal status, labour, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws.²²¹ It is also stated that procedural rights such as the right to fair trial, the presumption of innocence and the requirement of due process are not enjoyed equally by all Syrian citizens, ‘in part because interpretations of religious law provide the basis for elements of family and criminal law and

²⁰⁸ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁹ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 21

²¹⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 26

²¹¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²¹² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²¹³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²¹⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²¹⁵ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²¹⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²¹⁷ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²¹⁸ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 1

²¹⁹ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2

²²⁰ Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2012, [url](#)

²²¹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 60

discriminate against women’.²²² USDoS described the Government of Syria’s involvement in civil rights claims in general, including cases against sexual discrimination, as ‘stagnant’, and noted that most claims have gone unanswered.²²³

According to the EuroMedRights report of November 2017, the human rights issues of women have been excluded from all constitutional reforms and from all laws that have been enacted since the outbreak of the conflict. EuroMedRights claimed that the Syrian legal framework has ‘enshrined’ gender-based discrimination and violence against women in the social and cultural context that affects the situation of women ‘throughout their lives’. It was also reported that Syrian women have been deprived of the ‘appropriate legal opportunities’ to amend discriminatory laws on the basis of international conventions, since these are not given precedence over domestic laws in the 2012 Constitution.²²⁴

Personal Status Law

Researchers Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin estimated already in 2010 that Syria’s existing Personal Status Law was the ‘single greatest legal obstacle to gender equality’ and that, under said law, women lacked full control over issues related to marriage and divorce.²²⁵ For example, men and women had unequal divorce rights, with men enjoying the right to unilateral repudiation (*talaq*) while the divorce proceedings for women were reportedly ‘time consuming and arduous’.²²⁶ In custody issues, the divorced mother ‘loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family’.²²⁷ Different religious minorities such as Druze and various Christian sects follow their own laws of personal status which, for example, permit child marriage and confer the decision-making power and guardianship in the family to the father.²²⁸

In February 2019, the Syrian People’s Assembly approved amendments to tens of articles of the Personal Status Law. An analysis made by John al Saddy for the Library of Congress noted that the most significant modifications made to the Law were made with regard to the right of each spouse to include her or his own conditions in the marriage contract provided these conditions did not violate Syrian law or the Islamic Sharia law. The amendments also raise the age of marriage from 17 to 18 for both men and women, entitle women to marry without their guardian’s approval if they are 18 years old, and provide women with the right to invalidate a marriage if imposed by her guardian without her overt consent. In the case of divorce, the new amendments provide women abandoned by their husbands the possibility of requesting a divorce or a separation from the husband for compelling reasons.²²⁹

Syrian Nationality Law

On the basis of Syria Nationality Law²³⁰ Syrian nationality is passed on to a child through the child’s Syrian father.²³¹ Syrian nationality law prohibits women from passing on their citizenship to their children.²³² Syrian women reportedly encounter obstacles when ‘proceeding administratively with

²²² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15–17

²²³ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 61

²²⁴ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 1–2

²²⁵ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2

²²⁶ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 9

²²⁷ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 60

²²⁸ Mousa, D., Syrian Personal Status Laws, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 4, 5

²²⁹ LoC, Syria: Women’s Rights in Light of New Amendments to Syrian Personal Status Law, 8 April 2019, [url](#)

²³⁰ The Law is available (in English) at: [url](#)

²³¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

²³² Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 2; USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 53

civil registration in the absence of the father'.²³³ There are legal provisions that enable women to pass on their Syrian nationality to their children without the need to prove a legal link to the father. However, it was reported that this is rarely put into practice, likely because of the 'social norms and the stigma attached'.²³⁴ While children derive their citizenship solely from their father, children whose fathers are deceased or have gone missing are at risk of statelessness.²³⁵

Housing, land and property rights

Syrian women have faced limitations in the context of land and property ownership. Although the law provides women and men equal rights in questions of owning or managing land or other property, USDoS noted that cultural and religious norms impede women's property rights, which is reportedly especially the case in rural areas.²³⁶ The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that the lack of civil documentation required when proving land and/or property ownership has become a major challenge for Syrians, and especially women and girls living in areas controlled by non-state armed groups. According to UNPFA, Syrians from these areas are forced to enter Government-controlled areas to replace their missing documents, and in doing so risk arrest and detention.²³⁷ The theme of housing, land and property (HLP) rights was discussed further in an article by Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj of the Common Space Initiative from July 2017. Hallaj noted that the chaos and corruption prevalent in Syrian cities have 'engendered new forms of fraud, forced the sale of property, and forced the evacuation of residents under flimsy pretexts.' Hallaj pointed out that women have been affected the most by these developments, with the fate of their disappeared male heads of households not recognised by the Government. Although the number of female-headed households has increased, the legal framework is said to favour the husband's male next-of-kin. In addition, Hallaj estimated that '[t]he weak position of women when it comes to negotiating solutions among an increasingly militaristic and patriarchal social order will further deprive women of their HLP rights.'²³⁸

1.2.4 Protection provided by the authorities

The World Bank stated that effective protection of women against violence is limited and enforcement is either weak or non-existent.²³⁹ For example, USDoS noted that although the 'law criminalises rape and sexual assault of women, men and children', the Government of Syria does 'not enforce the law effectively'.²⁴⁰ According to EuroMedRights report of November 2017, 'there are no safe, confidential and appropriate complaint mechanisms for the victims' in places like hospitals, police departments, or offices of the public prosecutor.²⁴¹

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, the absence of law enforcement, including judicial redress mechanisms, in different parts of Syria has led to a situation where perpetrators of violence are not held accountable and where survivors of violence do not have formal protection. In addition, the general lawlessness has reportedly led to dismantling of pre-crisis social structures and existing social protection mechanisms among Syrian communities.²⁴² In areas controlled by non-state armed groups, formal justice systems are either non-existent or reportedly distrusted by women and girls living in these areas. However, UNPFA claimed that for many women and girls in Syria the effectiveness of the legal system is irrelevant, since cultural factors such as shame, disgrace, social

²³³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

²³⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

²³⁵ USDoS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 53

²³⁶ USDoS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 60

²³⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 38

²³⁸ Hallaj, O. A., Who Will Own the City? Urban Housing, Land and Property Issues in Syria, 31 July 2017, [url](#)

²³⁹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²⁴⁰ USDoS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 58

²⁴¹ EuroMedRights, Syria. Situation report on Violence against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p.2

²⁴² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 34

isolation, and verbal abuse potentially faced by women and girls when seeking justice may prevent them to consider it as an option.²⁴³

According to UNPFA, when discussing ways to cope with sexual and gender-based violence, the Syrians interviewed for the March 2019 report stated that the burden of preventing and responding to violence is put on the survivors themselves.²⁴⁴

1.2.5 Movement restrictions

The USDoS 2018 Human Rights Report stated that violence and significant cultural pressure have ‘severely restricted the movement of women in many areas’.²⁴⁵ The UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019 discussed movement restrictions imposed on women and girls either as self-imposed or by the family members or wider community in all Syrian governorates covered in the reports.²⁴⁶

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, movement restrictions affecting women and girls in particular are related to the risk of sexual violence and to harmful gender and social norms. In many cases these restrictions are based on the (perceived) threat of abduction, sexual violence and sexual harassment. In many cases harmful gender roles, instead of questions concerning their physical safety, are the reason for restricting the movement of women and girls. It is also noted that movement restrictions usually get worse when a girl reaches adolescence and the society starts to view her more as a woman than as a child.²⁴⁷ The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that movement restrictions were based on parents’ need to protect their children both from physical danger and from social interaction, and especially sexual contact deemed harmful (for their ‘marriageability’ and because of the shame brought to their families) by social customs and norms.²⁴⁸

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, many Syrian women and girls interviewed for the report feared rape and sexual assault on a daily basis.²⁴⁹ The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that Syrian women and girls ‘have fears related to their safety either as a result of crime or the crisis’ affecting the country. These fears are related to the violence women and girls might suffer either in public at the hands of community members or within the home by members of their family. These fears inhibit their movement in ‘gaining an education, earning a living and/or accessing health or psychosocial services.’ As a result, women and girls are reportedly becoming sheltered and further dependent on their family members for making decisions affecting their daily lives. In addition, the possible lack of education affects women and girls’ understanding of individuals’ human and legal rights and of their role in the society.²⁵⁰

The UNPFA report of November 2017 identified a number of factors that form the basis of movement restrictions for women and girls in Syria. These factors include the fear of sexual violence, the fear of arrest and/or detention, and negative social norms concerning female ‘honour’ among others, as well as more practical limitations such as the lack of safe transportation, the lack or loss of civil documentation, the lack of a chaperone, dress restrictions and rules imposed by extremist groups.²⁵¹ According to UNPFA, although women in Syria may have faced some movement restrictions prior to

²⁴³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 44

²⁴⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 39

²⁴⁵ USDoS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 48

²⁴⁶ See UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 66–70 (Aleppo), 76–78 (Hasakeh), 80–81 (Raqqqa), 90–92 (Damascus), 95–98 (Deraa), 102–103 (Deir ez-Zour), 105–106 (Hama), 108–112 (Homs), 114–118 (Idlib), 124–126 (Latakia), 128–132 (Quneitra); and UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 52–53 (Aleppo), 54–55 (Hasakeh), 57–58 (Raqqqa), 61–62 (Sweida), 63–64 (Damascus), 65–66 (Deir ez-Zor), 67–68 (Hama), 69–70 (Homs), 71–72 (Idlib), 75 (Latakia), 77 (Rif Dimashq), 78 (Tartous). While the November 2017 report covers every governorate, the March 2019 contains no governorate-level analysis on Dar’aa or Quneitra governorates.

²⁴⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

²⁴⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²⁴⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 26

²⁵⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

²⁵¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 41

the conflict on the basis of traditions and cultural norms emphasising female honour, many women and girls interviewed for the 2017 report identified a contrast between cultural restrictions to their freedom of movement before and after the outbreak of the conflict.²⁵²

1.2.6 The lack of civil documentation

According to the UNPFA report of March 2019, in the context of armed conflict, the absence of civil registration and documentation has proven to be ‘particularly harmful to women and girls.’ The lack of civil documentation leads to lack of legal identity and this can prove particularly problematic in a socioeconomic context where patriarchal social norms and customs tend to subvert women and girls’ rights. Without a legal identity, asserting claims during civil proceedings concerning various types of affairs such as divorce, custody, property ownership and criminal matters (e.g. cases of sexual and gender-based violence) becomes problematic. In addition, the lack of civil documentation can also stop women from enjoying their legal and/or traditional rights provided by their marriage contracts and block the access to other rights and services (including humanitarian aid).²⁵³

1.2.7 Work

Before the 2011 uprising, Syrian women were reportedly not particularly active in the workforce.²⁵⁴ According to the World Bank, the participation of women in the economy was ‘extremely low, and decreasing’.²⁵⁵ The share of women in the workforce decreased between 2005 and 2013 in parallel with the increase in overall unemployment in the country²⁵⁶, with the World Bank reporting a decrease from 20.4 to 13.2 % between 2001 and 2010.²⁵⁷ Based on the data gathered by the UN, in 2014 only an estimated 12.3 % of Syrian women were participating in the labour force compared to 71.6 % of men.²⁵⁸ In 2018, these shares were estimated to be 11.6 % for women and 69.7 % for men.²⁵⁹

Before the uprising of 2011, women’s roles and responsibilities were, to a large extent, culturally confined to their home. Societal barriers blocked women from several sectors of employment or from the opportunity to work in general.²⁶⁰ The majority of women were housewives, with those in the workforce and working outside of their homes working mainly in education and agriculture.²⁶¹ Citing a study by Kaisi and Al Zoughbi from 2007²⁶², the CARE report of March 2016 noted that, before the uprising, Syrian women had limited access to independent livelihoods due to a number of factors including gender-blind development policies and research, discriminatory legislation, traditions and attitudes, and lack of access to decision-making. For example, in the context of agricultural labour force, the land title was generally given to the male head of household. Also, the political participation of women in agricultural organisations and the political significance of these organisations was low.²⁶³

Before 2011, social norms ‘dictated that Syrian men provide for their families’, which enclosed women’s work to the domestic sphere and limited their access to public life.²⁶⁴ The employment options for women were limited by ‘overlapping legal restrictions and cultural norms.’ While women were obliged to ask their husbands for permission to work outside the home Articles 131 and 132 of Syrian labour law (Employment Act, No 91 of 1959) prohibited women from working at night or in

²⁵² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 43

²⁵³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 37–38

²⁵⁴ Williamson, S., Syrian Women in Crisis: Obstacles and Opportunities, January 2016, [url](#), p. 28

²⁵⁵ World Bank, The Toll of War, The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

²⁵⁶ Williamson, S., Syrian Women in Crisis: Obstacles and Opportunities, January 2016, [url](#), p. 28

²⁵⁷ World Bank, The Toll of War, The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

²⁵⁸ UN Data, Syrian Arab Republic - Country Profile n.d., [url](#)

²⁵⁹ UN Data, Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶⁰ Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria’s Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 13

²⁶² Kaisi A. & Al Zoughbi S., Women’s contributions to agricultural production and food security: Current status and perspectives in Syria, 2007, [url](#)

²⁶³ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 13

²⁶⁴ Williamson, S., Syrian Women in Crisis: Obstacles and Opportunities, January 2016, [url](#), p. 29

fields that are deemed as injurious to their health and morals.²⁶⁵ In their 2010 study, Kelly and Breslin pointed out that rural women were particularly marginalised with over 70 % of women participating for more than 15 hours-a-day in unpaid and informal labour with no access to benefits available to formal employees. This greater involvement of rural women in intensive and informal labour was accompanied by greater lack of schooling and lesser awareness of their legal rights. In addition, Kelly and Breslin stated that '[c]ustom, as opposed to law tends to be strongest in rural areas, compounding women's disadvantages with respect to marriage, inheritance, and other matters.'²⁶⁶

Based on the information provided by HNAP (Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme Syria) in 2018, the World Bank reported that (at the provincial level) the share of working-aged women currently employed was approximately 50 % in Damascus, approximately 40 % in Latakia and close to 40 % in Tartous. In Homs, Hama, Sweida, and Rif Dimashq this share was approximately 20 %, in Hasakah, Deir al-Zour, Dara'a, and Aleppo approximately 10 %, and in Raqqa, Idlib and Quneitra less than 10 %. The average share of employed working-aged women was a little bit over 20 %. Based on the information provided by WDI (World Development Indicators), in 2017 the unemployment rate was 41 % among women and 84 % among female youth (between 15 and 24 years of age) with the respective rates for males being 11 % (men) and 27 % (male youth).²⁶⁷ USDoS stated that Syrian women have participated in public life and in most professions, with women serving in the armed forces, although they are estimated by various sources utilised by USDoS to constitute a minority among lawyers, university professors and 'other professions'.²⁶⁸ The armed conflict has reportedly not altered the prominent role of women in agriculture. Based on Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates presented in a joint study from November 2015 (unpublished) CARE stated that women comprised 65 % of the economically active population in agriculture and in some areas up to 90 % of the agricultural labour force.²⁶⁹

In an extensive essay from 30 September 2019 mapping the Syrian economic situation from the grass-roots level and based on interviews of ordinary Syrians, Synaps Network noted that 'the devastation of Syria's male work force has had the transformative side-effect of thrusting women—and, to a lesser extent, children—into the forefront of economic activity, as families find ways to make ends meet in the absence of male breadwinners. Women have thus assumed an expanding role in virtually every sphere, from the civil service to manual labor to entrepreneurship.' An academic interviewed by Synaps Network claims that women are in 'an increasingly prominent role in small-scale businesses, start-ups, and NGOs' because women do not face the risk of conscription and can move more freely across checkpoints when serving in these positions.²⁷⁰ In a News Deeply article from December 2017 it is discussed that women are working in previously 'unthinkable' roles. According to Saadeh, a former independent MP who has campaigned for women's rights in Syria, some factories in Damascus are almost entirely staffed by women. It is also mentioned that women 'break into civil society, media and government sectors' in a way that was 'consistently prevented' before the conflict.²⁷¹

However, it has also been reported that formal labour opportunities for both men and women have decreased and women are increasingly employed in informal and small-scale work.²⁷² Based on their earlier, unpublished research CARE noted in March 2016 that employment opportunities in Syria were scarce particularly for women and that 'the income of female-headed households tends to be below

²⁶⁵ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 14

²⁶⁶ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 15

²⁶⁷ World World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, [url](#), p. 96

²⁶⁸ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 61

²⁶⁹ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), pp. 15–16

²⁷⁰ Synaps Network, War by other means. Syria's economic struggle, 30 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁷¹ Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria's Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#)

²⁷² Hilton, D., The Shifting Role of Women in Syria's Economy, 22 December 2017, [url](#); CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 15

that of male-headed households.²⁷³ According to the LDHR report of October 2018, the employment opportunities for women have continued to deteriorate during the conflict.²⁷⁴

A Financial Times article from January 2019 pointed out that research by humanitarian organisations shows that women's access to paid employment depends on where in Syria they are, and attitudes toward working women are said to vary across the country. While the capital Damascus is no exception to sexism, one woman interviewed for the Financial Times article states that, as a working woman, she usually faces surprise there rather than discrimination. The Financial Times reported in January 2019 that, with men in 'short supply' because of the war, many employers have had no other option but to hire women. The article depicted cases where women in their 40s and 50s have been forced to enter the labour market for the very first time because of their husbands and male relatives being either dead or otherwise unable to cover their living expenses.²⁷⁵

According to a study published in November 2016 by Orange²⁷⁶, handcraft professions were the most common professions for women in Syria. While 88 % of Syrian women interviewed for the report had handcraft skills, only 19 % had a preference to work in home-based businesses where these skills were most commonly put to use. The study noted that the majority of respondents would prefer to work in NGOs, the reasons given being NGOs' better payment structure, better career development opportunities, good training programs and a better working environment.²⁷⁷ According to a joint study by Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) and News Deeply from December 2017, training programs organised by NGOs were run primarily in areas such as the city of Tartous that have remained relatively stable throughout the conflict, in part because of programs run by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other organisations.²⁷⁸ TIMEP/ News Deeply added that the growing access to technology is said to have opened up opportunities for women to set up small-scale family businesses within the home and female entrepreneurship has reportedly risen from 4.4 % in 2009 to 22.4 % in 2017.²⁷⁹

The CARE report of March 2016 noted that Syrian women faced 'substantial barriers' while trying to establish new livelihoods. In particular, women had difficulty finding livelihood options deemed suitable for them. Such suitable options should be safe from physical violence like shelling and aerial bombardment, should not expose women to sexual harassment, should not risk the 'honour' of the woman or her husband, should be compatible with childcare and other household and care responsibilities, and should be found from sectors considered traditionally as feminine. In addition, some women also reportedly lack the necessary skills and resources to explore new livelihoods. Some reportedly feel overwhelmed and exhausted and, in rural areas, women have limited to no assets and income.²⁸⁰

The factors on the basis of which certain tasks are deemed as inappropriate for women include the 'physicality' of the task in question and whether the workplace and working hours match with the criteria set for 'the space and time where women's livelihood activities should be performed'. While security concerns and women's added responsibilities within the household played a role in assessing the suitability of the work in question, women were also reportedly 'strongly conditioned by cultural norms around women's "honour" that limit her interaction outside of the house'.²⁸¹

²⁷³ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 4–5

²⁷⁴ LDHR, Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities, October 2018, [url](#), p. 16.

²⁷⁵ Cornish, C., Shortage of men sees more Syrian women enter workforce, The Financial Times, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁶ Orange is a humanitarian NGO focused on Syria, [url](#)

²⁷⁷ Orange, Increasing Women's Access to The Labor Market in Syria, November 2016, [url](#), p. 6

²⁷⁸ TIMEP/ News Deeply, Syria's Women: Policies & Perspectives, 22 December 2017, [url](#), p. 2. UNDP discusses the effects of its programmes in Tartous in: UNDP, The resilient women of Syria, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁹ TIMEP/ News Deeply, Syria's Women: Policies & Perspectives, 22 December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

²⁸⁰ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸¹ CARE, Women, work & war: Syrian women and the struggle to survive five years of conflict, March 2016, [url](#), p. 22

1.2.8 Education

In 2014, 78.7 % of Syrian women and 81.4 % of men were enrolled in primary education, 50.5 % of women and 50.5 % of men in secondary education and 33.6 % of women and 32.4 % of men in tertiary education (gross enrolment ratio²⁸²).²⁸³ Even before the uprising of 2011 there were more women than men enrolled in Syrian universities.²⁸⁴ In 2007, 76.5 % of adult women and 89.7 % of adult men were literate while among those aged 15 to 24 the gender gap was relatively narrow with 92 % of women and 95.4 % of men literate.²⁸⁵

Syrian girls and women were denied access to education because of the harmful attitudes and customs (e.g. child marriage) entrenched by the conflict. According to the 2017 TIMEP report, Syria was facing an education crisis with an entire ‘lost generation’ dropping out from schools due to the protracted conflict. TIMEP noted that women and girls were particularly at risk because of ‘early and often unwanted marriages in the name of their own protection’.²⁸⁶ The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that girls in particular are denied education due to early and/or forced marriages or due to parents’ concern over their safety.²⁸⁷

According to the LDHR report of October 2018, after the outbreak of the conflict, the educational opportunities for women have become even more scarce than before. In some parts of the country opportunities have ‘vanished’ altogether for Syrians of both sexes.²⁸⁸

1.2.9 Recruitment to armed groups

The SNHR report of 25 November 2019 noted that ‘a small proportion of women and girls’ has been directly involved in Syria’s conflict-related hostilities.²⁸⁹ According to researcher Zerene Haddad women have generally not taken up arms during the Syrian conflict.²⁹⁰ In an International Alert report of July 2017, researchers Lana Khattab and Henri Myrtilinen highlighted the contrast between Arab and Kurdish areas in northern Syria, and noted that among the Kurdish forces participation of women in combat roles has not been a ‘rarity’.²⁹¹ However, the UNPFA report of November 2017 noted that unlike in prior years when UNPFA has published its Voices from Syria report, girls were mentioned in the interviews carried out for the 2017 report as being at risk of armed recruitment. The Syrians interviewed for the report discuss the threat of armed recruitment – or recruitment to ‘Jihad’ – and other recruitment by non-state armed groups of girls in Afrin sub-district of Aleppo and Kafr Nubul in Idlib governorate.²⁹²

1.2.10 Additional categories of vulnerability

Widows and divorced women

Widows and divorced women and girls can be distinguished as a subcategory of female-headed households, and as a category highly stigmatised by the Syrian society. The UNPFA report of November 2017 stated that divorced or separated women and girls are particularly stigmatised because they are

²⁸² The gross enrolment ratio for each level of education is a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to this level of education in a given school-year.

²⁸³ UN Data, Syrian Arab Republic - Country Profile n.d., [url](#); Data from 2018 unavailable in UN Data, Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸⁴ ICEF Monitor, Women increasingly outpacing men’s higher education participation in many world markets, 22 October 2014, [url](#)

²⁸⁵ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., Syria, 2010, [url](#), p. 14

²⁸⁶ TIMEP/ News Deeply, Access to education, 4 August 2017, [url](#), p. 3

²⁸⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

²⁸⁸ LDHR, Gender, Gender Based Violence and Stigma in Syrian Communities, October 2018, [url](#), p. 16.

²⁸⁹ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁹⁰ Haddad, Z., How the crisis is altering women’s roles in Syria, September 2014, [url](#), p. 47

²⁹¹ Khattab, L. & Myrtilinen, H., “Most of the men want to leave”. Armed groups, displacement and the gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria, July 2017, [url](#), p. 27

²⁹² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 11, 48

regarded as ‘bad’ and held responsible for the failure of the marriage and the suffering of their husband and children.²⁹³ Before the outbreak of the civil war divorced women reportedly had particular difficulties in supporting themselves since they tended ‘to work informally, at home or in low-paying jobs’.²⁹⁴ According to an article published by The New Arab on 29 January 2019, Syrian widows are ‘struggling with unemployment, low salaries and high living costs’.²⁹⁵ In the UNPFA report of November 2017, it was stated that widows and divorced women and girls were at particular risk of ‘sexual violence, emotional and verbal abuse, forced marriage, polygamy and serial temporary marriages, movement restrictions, economic violence and exploitation, among others’.²⁹⁶

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, when faced with the stigma of widowhood or divorce, the families of widows and divorced women and girls – as well as the women themselves – may employ negative coping mechanisms such as movement restrictions, forced and child marriage, survival sex and non-disclosure.²⁹⁷ In particular, widows and divorced women and girls are said to express ‘fear that their children would be taken away from them or that they would be forced to leave their children in order to provide for income’.²⁹⁸ In addition, the UNPFA noted that the lack or loss of civil documentation and/or property-related documents has major implications for widows and divorced women and girls. This is said to be particularly the case in areas not controlled by the Government.²⁹⁹ For example, the lack of a family booklet could make it harder for them to access distributions, as they would be considered as part of their parents’ family.³⁰⁰

Based on focus group discussions in Syrian communities, the UNPFA report of March 2019 stated that many women, whether divorced or widowed, ‘find themselves vulnerable to an array of abuse and exploitation at the hands of extended family members and community members’ for the reason that family and community members do not consider the particular circumstances that have led to their predicament.³⁰¹ In addition, due to the stigma they face for their civil status, widows and divorced women often remain homebound and are therefore unable to access humanitarian assistance or essential services specialised in gender-based violence.³⁰²

In the UNPFA report of November 2017, it is pointed out that Syrians interviewed for the report discussed the ‘need to find husbands’ for widowed or divorced women and girls in order to increase their protection and safeguard their honour, and that many of these women and girls were re-married, for example, to extended family member ‘to be taken care of’.³⁰³ The tradition of arranging marriages between widows and the brothers of their deceased husbands on the basis of both financial and social motives was discussed also in an Enab Baladi article of 23 December 2017. In this article, widows were depicted as ‘socially imprisoned’.³⁰⁴

The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that widowed women are considered to be in need of protection since they have been placed within their social situation involuntarily.³⁰⁵ In comparison, divorced women are perceived to be deserving of infringements and violations since divorce is considered as ‘a remedy that should not be sought’, although the divorce might be sought because of domestic violence within the marriage, or it might be the result of a husband taking advantage of the

²⁹³ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 34

²⁹⁴ Kelly, S. & Breslin, J., *Syria*, 2010, [url](#), p. 23

²⁹⁵ The New Arab, *Syrian widows struggle with living costs and exploitation*, 29 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁶ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 10

²⁹⁷ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 36

²⁹⁸ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 10

²⁹⁹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 10, 36

³⁰⁰ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 10

³⁰¹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

³⁰² UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

³⁰³ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 34

³⁰⁴ Enab Baladi, *Syrian Martyrs’ Widows are Socially Imprisoned Women*, 23 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁵ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

fact that the marriage certificate has gone missing to ‘leave marriage without legal (filing for a divorce) or familial (paying dowry) complications’.³⁰⁶

The CoI report of August 2019 noted that many deaths of men and boys in the custody of Government forces have gone undocumented. In these cases, women and other family members, while unable to access the death certificates or any other documentation proving the death of their husbands and other male relatives, have also been ‘unable to move forward with the legal aspect of the deaths’, which has ‘impeded inheritance and custody rights’. This has severely restricted their freedom of movement and particularly their possibilities to travel abroad with minor children. According to the CoI report, in the cases of undocumented deaths women have been either ‘forced to pronounce their spouses dead after four years’ or to ‘claim abandonment after one year’.³⁰⁷

Former detainees

An article published by Syria Untold in October 2019 reported that women detainees are particularly vulnerable in the face of hardships caused by the civil war. The article depicted former female detainees as traumatised, having lost their livelihood and/or members of their families and possibly also ‘cut out from their society’ when released.³⁰⁸ According to the SNHR report of 25 November 2019, it is ‘well-known’ that the status of women as (former) detainees and/or prisoners is one of the factors that influences the status and the perceived dignity of a particular family in Syrian society.³⁰⁹ Researcher Marie Forestier noted that many former detainees have been rejected by their families irrespective of whether they were raped or not during detention. Forestier stated that the aspect of the repression of women on the basis of norms prevalent in Syria’s patriarchal society has, to a large extent, been under-reported because of the protracted conflict, social stigma, lack of access to survivors and the fear of retaliation.³¹⁰

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017 women released from detention reported their ‘daily struggle to heal and survive’.³¹¹ Former detainees interviewed for this report were said to be suffering from psychological distress and in many cases from severe physical injuries from violence, including gynaecological injuries from sexual violence, and from health conditions such as pneumonia and hepatitis. In addition there was a ‘widespread assumption that women detainees have experienced sexual violence’, which can be perceived by the family and the community as a stain on the victim’s dignity and honour. This stigma can reportedly lead to social isolation, rejection from employment, divorce, disownment by the family and even ‘honour’ killing.³¹² Syrian journalist-activist and author Leila Al-Shami pointed out that, in Syria’s conservative society, where chastity is held in especially high regard, ‘being a victim of sexual assault can become an accusation in itself.’ In this context, according to al-Shami, women are forced to defend themselves by ‘emphasi[sing] the obvious’, namely, that it was not their choice to end up being detained.³¹³ Al-Shami mentioned a report by Amnesty International in which three former female detainees interviewed for the report said that ‘since their release, their families are no longer in contact with them as the result of the social stigma that is attached to women who have been detained.’³¹⁴

³⁰⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

³⁰⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

³⁰⁸ Syria Untold, Imprisoned By The Regime, And Ostracised By Society, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 10

³¹⁰ Forestier, M., ‘You want freedom? This is your freedom’: Rape as a tactic of the Assad regime, LSE, March 2017, [url](#), p. 1

³¹¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 32

³¹² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 32, 33

³¹³ Al-Shami, L., Women Are at the Forefront of Challenging Extremism in Idlib, Chatham House, July 2018, [url](#)

³¹⁴ Amnesty International, ‘It Breaks the Human’. Torture, Disease and Death in Syria’s Prisons, 2016, [url](#), p. 8

Persons with disabilities

According to the CoI report of 15 August 2019, women and girls with either physical or intellectual disabilities have been adversely affected by the conflict.³¹⁵ The SNHR report of 25 November 2019 stated that attacks carried out by the Government forces ‘have left thousands of women injured’, with many of them permanently disabled as the result of ‘amputation, loss of organs or deformities resulting from burns’ and experiencing the psychological impact of their injuries.³¹⁶

The UNPFA report of March 2019 noted that persons with disabilities, and especially women and adolescent girls with disabilities, ‘are at high risk of various forms of violence’. Women and girls with disabilities are said to encounter ‘more barriers than men and boys for receiving assistance (support) or in accessing services for rehabilitation’. The report adds that many private and public spaces do not accommodate the needs of the disabled and that information provided by health services, psychosocial support services and legal services is not often available for those with cognitive, visual or hearing impairments. Also, with regard to access to services, necessary transportation and facilities are reported to be lacking. In addition, persons with disabilities and their caregivers are reportedly facing financial strain, food insecurity, and often increased risk of violence because of their (homebound) status and inability to work. Specifically, the caregivers are often sexually exploited in order to meet their basic needs and those of the persons they care for.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

³¹⁶ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 8

³¹⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 23–24

2. The situation of women in areas controlled by non-state armed groups

2.1 The situation of women in the Idlib enclave

According to the CoI report published on 15 August 2019, civilians continue to bear the brunt of the ongoing hostilities affecting the so-called Idlib enclave (Idlib, northern parts of Hama and Latakia, and western Aleppo governorates) with vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and minorities the most affected.³¹⁸

According to the CoI report on sexual and gender-based violence published on 8 March 2018, cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence targeting women perpetrated by members of non-state armed groups³¹⁹ have been documented. However, the CoI estimated that these acts have been ‘considerably less common’ than similar infringements perpetrated by Government forces and their associates.³²⁰ In the March 2018 report, this fact was explained through two observations. On the one hand the use of checkpoints has been relatively rare among non-state armed groups and, on the other, the movement of populations into areas controlled by these groups has been less significant than in the case of Government-held areas. The CoI noted that there is ‘no evidence of a systematic practice or policy on the part of [non-state] armed groups to use sexual and gender-based violence to instil fear, extract information, or enforce loyalty.’ Incidents of sexual and gender-based violence committed by non-state armed groups are reportedly connected to other social phenomena such as exploitation, sectarianism, and revenge, with cases documented involving victims from Kurdish background, those accused of being Shi’a, and a person suspected to be supporting the Government.³²¹

Although sexual and gender-based violence targeting women is deemed ‘less common’ among the non-government armed groups, the jihadist coalition Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), currently (as of November 2019) in primary control of the Idlib enclave, has been responsible for the repressive social norms and policies discriminating against female residents of the enclave. According to the CoI, the emergence of extremist groups such as HTS and ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has ‘resulted in women, girls, and minorities being subjected to a wider range of violations including executions, restriction of freedom of movement, restrictions of dress, and subsequent corporal punishment for breach of the codes imposed’.³²² HTS has also reportedly committed acts of sexual and gender-based violence, such as illegal executions of women accused of ‘dishonouring’ their families.³²³ However,

³¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

³¹⁹ The non-state armed groups identified in the cases of sexual and gender-based violence analysed in the CoI report are mainly groups associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) coalition. The groups involved with cases of detention and kidnapping of women and girls from religious minorities (e.g. Alawites, Ismailis, Shi’as, Druze, and Christians) include groups with more radical leanings, such as Jaish al-Islam and Failaq al-Rahman. Violations committed by the most prominent non-state armed groups, namely Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are discussed in their separate sections. UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 13–14 (non-state armed groups), 14–16 (HTS), 16–19 (ISIS), 19 (SDF)

³²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

³²¹ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 13

³²² UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 4

³²³ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 15–16; USDOS notes how HTS has permitted and committed ‘honour’ killings in territories under its control. USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 59

conditions in HTS-controlled areas have been ‘significantly worse’ for minority groups (such as Christians and Druze), with incidents of gender-based violence associated with HTS reportedly decreasing as a result of these minorities fleeing the areas under HTS’s control.³²⁴ While observing the use of sexual violence as a tool to instil fear, to humiliate and to punish, the CoI noted that jihadist groups such as HTS and ISIS have used sexual violence ‘as part of their enforced social order’.³²⁵

2.1.1 Sexual and gender-based violence in the Idlib enclave

The UNPFA reports from November 2017 and March 2019 contain information on different types of sexual and gender-based violence reported in HTS-controlled parts of Idlib and Aleppo governorates. A Syrian adolescent girl from Jebel Saman sub-district in Aleppo governorate interviewed for the UNPFA report of March 2019 claims that sexual violence is occurring but it is ‘not reported due to the stigma’. The report noted that sexual violence is occurring in markets, schools and streets.³²⁶ The UNPFA report of March 2019 emphasised that in Idlib governorate sexual violence is ‘experienced primarily by widows, divorced women, persons with disabilities and [under-aged] girls’.³²⁷ The lack of a male protector is identified as a factor exposing widows and divorced women to sexual violence.³²⁸ The fact that sexual exploitation is disproportionately often associated to widows and divorced women was also noted in the UNPFA report of November 2017. Widows are reportedly at particular risk of polygamy and of forced marriage, with families in the latter case seeking to re-marry their widowed family members quickly in order to ‘raise the children properly’.³²⁹ Rape is the most discussed type of sexual violence among the Syrians living in the Idlib enclave interviewed for the UNPFA November 2017 report. Women and girls are said to be particularly at risk. Additional categories of vulnerability include unaccompanied and separated children and women and girls smuggled into Turkey. Some of those interviewed for the November 2017 report associated rape with negative coping mechanisms of forced marriage (where victims are forced to marry perpetrators) and ‘honour’ killings.³³⁰

Abduction for the purposes of sexual violence is one of the main forms of sexual violence discussed in the UNPFA report of March 2019 with regard to Idlib governorate, with sources discussing kidnapping of under-aged girls and boys leading to rape and possible homicide.³³¹ The UNPFA report of November 2017 extensively discussed abductions and the related fear experienced by the women and girls in Idlib governorate. The phenomenon is connected to sexual violence and homicide as well as to the trade of body parts such as organs which is affecting, according to one source interviewed by UNPFA, both women and children. Adolescent girls are reported to be at particular risk. The fear of abductions is reportedly affecting the movement of women and girls in a major way. UNPFA stated that its sources ‘perceived abductions as increasing in Idlib governorate and linked this to the spread of weapons [in the governorate]’.³³²

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, sexual exploitation has been reported in Idlib governorate in ‘the context of distributions and with regard to widows and divorced women’³³³ and, according to an UNPFA report of March 2019, in the context of wealthy individuals paying money to less well-off women in exchange for sexual favours.³³⁴ In the UNPFA report of November 2017, it was noted that, in Idlib governorate, internally displaced widowed and divorced women had reportedly

³²⁴ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 16

³²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 1

³²⁶ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 52

³²⁷ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 71

³²⁸ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 72

³²⁹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 117

³³⁰ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 116

³³¹ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 71

³³² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 118

³³³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 117

³³⁴ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 71

been segregated from other people in IDP camps under the pretence of protection. These people had been subjected to additional restrictions, for example with regard to their freedom of movement and the right to keep their children.³³⁵ The report of March 2019 noted that some ‘widows and divorced women and girls have been forced into designated areas within IDP-camps called “widow camps” where these women and girls are at risk of exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence, family separation and forced marriages. The report stated that this ‘stigmatisation hinders the right to freedom of movement and access to humanitarian assistance.’³³⁶ In the November 2017 UNFPA report a woman from Salqin sub-district in Idlib governorate stated that exploitation of women is ‘everywhere’ and particularly targets widows who do not have any other source of income.³³⁷

2.1.2 The life of women under Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham

According to the Col report of 31 January 2019, up to 3 million Syrians live in those parts of the Idlib governorate falling under the control of HTS. It is estimated that ‘the vast majority’ of people living in HTS-controlled areas are affected by the absence of a centralised system of governance with the ability to meet their ‘most pressing daily needs’. In particular, economic hardships are reportedly affecting female-headed households, which are forced to ‘remove their daughters from school and “marry them off”’.³³⁸ In a report published in August 2019, while discussing the situation in the Idlib enclave and the ‘unacknowledged harm’³³⁹ experienced by Syrian women, the Col pointed out the effects of large-scale offensives on the civilian infrastructure and on the continuation of service provision, with several examples affecting women and female-headed households in particular. The Col noted that the access to agricultural lands for women, and in particular female-headed households in need of securing a sustainable livelihood, has been ‘severely affected following fires that burned tens of thousands of crops and wheat fields’.³⁴⁰

Concerning access to healthcare, the Col reported that numerous medical facilities have been damaged or destroyed because of the hostilities, forcing many women to give birth out in the open without the access to necessary prenatal and postnatal assistance.³⁴¹ Middle East Eye (MEE) reported in June 2019 that, with access to hospitals reduced significantly as a result of bombardments by the Government forces and their allies, midwives are assisting women with delivering their babies in the olive groves situated along the Turkish border. A medical expert interviewed by MEE noted that women in Idlib enclave who make it to the hospital suffer from poor nutrition, extreme stress and the absence of proper sanitation and that these factors have contributed to significant increase in high blood pressure, urinary infections and miscarriages among these women.³⁴²

According to an article published by the Independent on 17 December 2018, the economic situation in Idlib was dire and the situation in general was depicted as unstable. There was a lack of jobs, and the available medical equipment and drugs are reportedly scarce. According to a woman from Idlib, clean water is bought when available and affordable. Electricity is available for ‘a few hours a day’ for those paying the monthly subscription. People are reportedly waiting to receive humanitarian aid while there is not enough aid available for all. The woman interviewed in the article stated that in Idlib ‘high poverty and desperation has led to a rise in kidnappings for ransom money.’ The article noted

³³⁵ UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 36

³³⁶ UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 23

³³⁷ UNFPA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 29

³³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#) p. 12

³³⁹ Such as ‘distinctive socioeconomic and moral harms, which impact negatively the exercise of a broad range of human rights’. UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

³⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

³⁴¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 17

³⁴² Hagedorn E, Pregnant and alone: Syrian women fleeing Idlib offensive forced to give birth outdoors, MEE, 29 June 2019, [url](#)

that there are more women than men in opposition-held areas and, therefore, women are often responsible for gaining access to basic services on behalf of their families.³⁴³

The CoI report of 15 August 2019 noted how, in areas under the influence of HTS, civilians – including women and children – expressing political dissent have endured persecution in the form of unlawful detentions, kidnappings, and torture.³⁴⁴ In areas under the control of HTS, the freedoms of Syrian women and girls are restricted in many different ways.³⁴⁵ The SNHR report of 25 November 2019 noted that HTS is limiting the freedom of movement and expression of women and girls living in areas under the group’s control and has subjected them to restrictions on work, education, clothing and on access to healthcare.³⁴⁶ In addition, SNHR stated that HTS has been mainly responsible for targeting female activists taking part in civil activities with harassment, threats, and persecution, and for preventing these women from working.³⁴⁷

According to the UNPFA report of November 2017, women and girls residing in Idlib governorate are affected by several forms of restrictions of freedom. The restrictions mentioned include movement restrictions, dress restrictions, the denial or restriction of education, denial of inheritance and dowry, and loss of decision-making, for example with regard to marriage, education, movement, visiting family and friends. Widows and adolescent girls were reported as being particularly at risk. The main reasons for movement restrictions for women and girls mentioned in the report are societal customs and tradition, the deteriorating security situation and rules imposed by extremist groups in control of the area. The freedom of girls was reportedly particularly affected by the fear of abduction and harassment.³⁴⁸ The UNPFA report of March 2019 listed similar reasons, including customs and traditions as well as risks of rape and harassment, abduction and bombings.³⁴⁹ Women and adolescent girls across Idlib governorate were reportedly ‘very frightened’ when leaving their house without a family member, often the brother or a parent, accompanying them.³⁵⁰ Restrictions on women and girls’ freedom of movement are reportedly closely linked to their possibilities to access services and humanitarian assistance. Reportedly this is especially affecting adolescent girls who need a chaperone to accompany them when leaving the home.³⁵¹

Al-Shami noted that women have been disproportionately affected by HTS’s attempts to regulate civilian life and impose its rule on the Idlib enclave’s population. For example, HTS has issued religious edicts, enforced by HTS’s own religious police, to control how women dress, to prevent the mixing of men and women on public transportation and to oblige widows to move in with a male guardian (*mahram*). These measures have reportedly prompted demonstrations among the local community with women’s active participation. Shami pointed out that ‘women’s resistance to extremism requires women’s organization, and this can pose a challenge in more conservative and traditional communities where women’s role is often relegated to the private sphere.’³⁵² The CoI noted that in some parts of Idlib women and girls were required to be accompanied by a male guardian (*mahram*). According to the CoI, HTS interferes with freedom of movement and expression of women and girls, for instance by vetting female passengers at checkpoints for cases of indecently or inappropriately

³⁴³ Independent (The)., *Forgotten Women: The displaced Syrian mothers still fighting for change – who say “I want you to feel our suffering”*, 17 December 2018, [url](#)

³⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁴⁵ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2; UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 120

³⁴⁶ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 34

³⁴⁷ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

³⁴⁸ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 120

³⁴⁹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 72

³⁵⁰ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 120

³⁵¹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), p. 123

³⁵² Al-Shami, L., *Women Are at the Forefront of Challenging Extremism in Idlib*, Chatham House, July 2018, [url](#)

dressed females. In addition, the CoI stated that ‘many women have consciously stopped visiting public places’ in order to avoid public scrutiny and stigmatisation by HTS.³⁵³

2.2 The situation of women in the Kurdish-controlled areas

Following the retreat of the Government forces from northern Syria in the summer of 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG), affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), had the opportunity to institutionalise its conception of women’s equality in areas under its control. Gender issues reportedly became central to PYD’s policies and women’s associations were established in every autonomous local commune and at every level of the system. Laws were enacted to redress inequalities entrenched in Syrian state laws, institutions were established for the purpose of protecting women from domestic violence and the number of women using these institutions reportedly indicated normative changes taking place in the society.³⁵⁴

According to expert panellists cited in a report by Stein and Burchfield of August 2019, the Autonomous Administration established by the PYD has made progress with regard to women’s participation in administrative matters. For example, the Administration’s Charter of the Social Contract grants women the right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural affairs and sets the share of women’s representation in all governing bodies, institutions and committees to 40 %. However, this progress has reportedly been limited to areas under the control of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and many governance structures in north-east Syria operating independently from the Kurdish administration have reportedly not experienced these changes. It was also pointed out that women’s participation is not the same thing as actual empowerment, with many women in leadership roles reportedly poorly equipped to succeed in them, and lacking training, education or the respect of their peers.³⁵⁵

The SNHR report of 25 November 2019 noted that women have been subjected to forced conscription in areas controlled by the SDF. Women and girls have been taken by force to recruitment camps after being either abducted or detained in public places or at their homes. Feminist activists and others either objecting to or criticising the practices of the SDF have also been detained during house raids, while visiting public places and at checkpoints. In addition, women have been detained because of their ethnicity or gender. Between January 2014 and 25 November 2019, SNHR has documented 543 cases of women and girls either still detained or forcibly disappeared by the SDF.³⁵⁶ A Human Rights Watch reported in August 2018 documents YPG’s recruitment of children, including girls, also in active combat roles.³⁵⁷ Raqqa-based activist Feras Hanoush claimed that the Autonomous Administration and the SDF have integrated women into security forces and local councils only superficially and for the purpose of achieving political goals without actually empowering them. In addition, Hanoush reported that, according to locals, the SDF had taken advantage of the unstable financial situation of women to force them to take part in women-focused rallies and conferences set up by the Kurdish administration.³⁵⁸

Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019) noted that Kurdish women have often ‘experienced more liberal cultural norms held by Kurdish communities generally and promoted by political parties’ and in many communities ‘the practice of wearing headscarves was not commonly observed, segregation was minimal and participation of women in traditionally male-dominated activities was in many cases less

³⁵³ UN Human Rights Council, “I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 16

³⁵⁴ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019, pp. 78–80

³⁵⁵ Stein, A. & Burchfield, E., *The future of northeast Syria*, Atlantic Council, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁵⁶ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 19, 21

³⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Armed Group Recruiting Children in Camps*, 3 August 2018, [url](#); [see also](#) Hanoush, F., *Tokenism or empowerment? Syrian women and the SDF*, Atlantic Council, 12 March 2019, [url](#)

³⁵⁸ Hanoush, F., *Tokenism or empowerment? Syrian women and the SDF*, Atlantic Council, 12 March 2019, [url](#)

restricted than in other areas of Syria.³⁵⁹ However, the situation was reportedly largely dependent on family and individual beliefs and customs, and adherence to traditional social norms was more common in more heavily religious or traditional communities.³⁶⁰ A panellist cited in Stein and Burchfield noted that women in Kurdish areas ‘are still dealing with institutions and traditions that have prevailed for years’.³⁶¹ Allsopp and van Wilgenburg noted that, also in Kurdish areas, women ‘continued to face stigma surrounding public roles and traversing traditionally male-dominated territories remained challenging for them’.³⁶² Hanoush noted that north-east Syria is still ‘generally seen as a rural and tribal society in which women’s roles are limited to housework or within administrative institutions’.³⁶³

A panellist cited in Stein and Burchfield noted that there is a lack of diversity within female representation, with most candidates for positions reserved for women selected by the Kurdish-dominated TEV-DEM (The Movement for a Democratic Society) umbrella organisation and PYD members nominated in the higher positions.³⁶⁴ PYD’s critics have associated the collectivism inherent in its guiding principle of the emancipation of all women with the authoritarianism which the PYD has displayed towards other Kurdish parties and grassroots initiatives in the Kurdish areas.³⁶⁵ Allsopp and van Wilgenburg pointed out that, although PYD’s stress on education and empowerment of women has reportedly stimulated changes in attitude and in participation by women as well as men and the focus on gender has clearly benefited women, some Syrian Kurdish women reportedly felt uncomfortable with ‘the ideologizing of women’s rights, the implicit associations of liberation with militarization and the method of implementation of equalities’. Also, some men considered these same issues as ‘a practical threat to traditional customs and identity’.³⁶⁶

According to an SNHR report of 25 November 2019, members of the SDF have committed acts of sexual violence within the detention centres and camps managed and administered by the organisation. The most prominent types of sexual violence among the SDF included harassment during searches and verbal sexual violence (e.g. sexually explicit statements and threats of rape).³⁶⁷ As discussed above on the basis of the UNPFA reports from 2017 and 2019, the risk of the most common forms of sexual and gender-based violence, such as sexual violence, domestic and family violence and child marriages, has been reported in all parts of Syria. Likewise, movement restrictions imposed on women and girls are reportedly affecting their freedom of movement in every Syrian governorate. In addition, specific profiles, such as widows and divorced women, face a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence irrespective of the geographical area (see [Section 2.2.10](#)). In this respect, the areas mainly in control of the Kurdish-led SDF, such as the governorates of Hasaka and Raqqa, are no exception.³⁶⁸

In the UNPFA report of November 2017 the risk of sexual violence, domestic violence and child marriages was reported in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates (controlled mainly by the SDF).³⁶⁹ In the March 2019 report, women in both of these governorates were reportedly at risk of sexual violence, child marriages and ‘honour’ killings. In Hasakeh governorate family violence was also reported.³⁷⁰ The freedom of movement of women and girls was curtailed by restrictions in both governorates.³⁷¹

³⁵⁹ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019, p. 79

³⁶⁰ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019, p. 79

³⁶¹ Stein, A. & Burchfield, E., *The future of northeast Syria*, Atlantic Council, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁶² Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019, p. 79

³⁶³ Hanoush, F., *Tokenism or empowerment? Syrian women and the SDF*, Atlantic Council, 12 March 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁴ Stein, A. & Burchfield, E., *The future of northeast Syria*, Atlantic Council, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁵ Schmidinger 2018, p. 6

³⁶⁶ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019, p. 80–81

³⁶⁷ SNHR, *28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011*, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 22

³⁶⁸ The situation of women in governorates of Hasaka and Raqqa is discussed in UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 76–81; and UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 54–58

³⁶⁹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 76–81

³⁷⁰ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 54–58

³⁷¹ UNPFA, *Voices from Syria 2019*, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 54–58

In the March 2019 report it was stated that these restrictions are reportedly particularly severe in Raqqa governorate.³⁷² Widows and divorced women and adolescent girls were at particular risk of sexual and gender-based violence in both governorates.³⁷³

According to the CoI report of March 2018, the Commission had not documented cases of rape of detainees, neither male nor female, by the SDF. However, there had been reports of cases of male detainees being subjected to, or threatened with, burning of genitals.³⁷⁴ The CoI report of March 2018 noted how the fear of being assaulted and humiliated affected the lives of women in the SDF-run camps for internally displaced persons (IDP). In the latter half of 2017, while managing the large-scale movement of IDPs during the military campaign against ISIS in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates, the SDF reportedly asked IDPs to pay the SDF authorities and acquire a local guarantor in order to be able to exit the camps. Unable to meet these terms, many women travelling alone had reportedly no other option but to remain in the camps.³⁷⁵

2.3 The situation of women in areas controlled by Turkey-backed armed groups

The situation of women and girls in areas under control of Turkey-backed armed groups is defined by similar types of social and cultural factors as those in other parts of Syria. The reports concerning the security situation in these areas have discussed the violations committed by Turkey-backed armed groups against local residents and the general chaos, lawlessness, and criminality prevalent in the area.³⁷⁶ According to an article published by the Guardian in November 2018, this general lawlessness has affected the situation of women in areas under Turkish supervision, with institutional protections for women severely lacking. The Guardian cited Ola Marwa, a head of protection for a women's NGO operating in northern Syria, who stated that 'the only rule' in these areas is defined by traditions, customs and the factions currently in control.³⁷⁷

As already discussed in the sections above on the basis of the UNPFA reports from 2017 and 2019, the risk of the most common forms of sexual and gender-based violence, such as sexual violence, domestic and family violence and child marriages, has been reported in all parts of Syria, including the northern parts of Aleppo governorate controlled by the Turkey-backed forces.³⁷⁸ Likewise, movement restrictions imposed on women and girls are reportedly affecting their freedom of movement in every Syrian governorate. In addition, specific profiles, such as widows and divorced women, face a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence irrespective of the geographical area. For example, the situation of female-headed households (the category of Syrian women identified in sections above as being particularly at risk of sexual violence and other hardships) was discussed also with regard to Syria's north-western areas.³⁷⁹ (For more information on female-headed households and on widows and divorced women, see Sections [2.2.1](#) and [2.2.10](#))

The CoI report of 15 August 2019 noted that, particularly in those areas of Afrin, sub-district of Aleppo, controlled by non-state armed groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Failaq al-Sham, Jaish Usud al-Sharqiyah,

³⁷² UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 57–58

³⁷³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 54–58

³⁷⁴ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 19

³⁷⁵ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 19

³⁷⁶ See, UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 11–12; OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), pp. 5, *passim.*; Haid, H., Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy, September 2017, [url](#), p. 13

³⁷⁷ The Guardian 'They see no shame': 'honour' killing video shows plight of Syrian women, 12 November 2018, [url](#)

³⁷⁸ The situation of women in Aleppo governorate is discussed in UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2018, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 66–70; and UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 52–53

³⁷⁹ Goktas, M., Syrian women take up bread-winner role as war lingers on, Anadolu Agency, 31 May 2019, [url](#)

and Nur al-Din al-Zinki – defined in the report as ‘armed factions following extremist ideologies’ – women’s rights have been severely restricted. This included the imposition of strict dress codes for women and girls and restrictions on their freedom of movement. Women and girls were also reportedly harassed by members of armed groups, especially when passing through checkpoints.³⁸⁰

A monthly report of June 2018 by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported high levels of violent crime – including robberies, harassment, abductions, and murder – in areas under Turkish influence in the northern Aleppo governorate. The report stated that OHCHR had received reports of abducted civilians, including women and children, with some of the abductees released after paying ransom and others remaining missing. The report identified members of Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Division, and Ahrar al-Sharqiya as the individuals particularly responsible for reported violations.³⁸¹

When discussing the security situation in Afrin, the CoI highlighted the threat of abductions and kidnappings with wealthy individuals and those of Kurdish origin at particular risk. These acts are reportedly often motivated by a combination of economic, political, and security reasons.³⁸²

In the UNPFA report of March 2019 Syrians from Aleppo sub-districts of Afrin and al-Bab, controlled by the Turkish-backed groups, discussed the risk of child marriage and ‘honour killings’ in the area and identified these phenomena as coping mechanisms with regard to potential victims (child marriages) and survivors (‘honour killings’) of sexual violence and their families. The fear of abduction and sexual violence is discussed as a major factor limiting the movement of women and girls in areas under Turkish influence, with the fear of shame and stigma attached to sexual harassment also playing a role.³⁸³ An article from the Guardian from November 2018 discussed a particular case of ‘honour killing’ in Turkish-controlled Jarablus, and poses questions about the future of rule of law in areas under Turkey’s sway.³⁸⁴

2.4 The situation of women in areas under the influence of ISIS

On 23 March 2019, after the SDF’s final successful push to capture ISIS’s last stronghold of Baghuz in the eastern Deir ez-Zor governorate, the commander of the SDF Mazloum Abdi pronounced the end of ISIS’s territorial rule in Syria.³⁸⁵ In its most recent map charting of ‘ISIS Operating areas’ in Syria and neighbouring Iraq dated 19 August 2019, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) did not mark any geographical areas as being under control of ISIS.³⁸⁶ According to the CoI report of 15 August 2019, the dire humanitarian situation in Deir ez-Zor governorate was ‘aggravated by the continued presence’ of ISIS, which was responsible for a ‘low-level insurgency’ in the governorate.³⁸⁷

According to the SNHR report of 25 November 2019 discussing the situation of women in Syria, women have been killed as a result of ISIS’s activities in areas formerly under its control. However, the number of people killed by ISIS declined as the areas were captured by other parties to the conflict. While SNHR has not documented new cases of arrests or abductions carried out by ISIS in 2019, the

³⁸⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 12, n17

³⁸¹ OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), pp. 5–6

³⁸² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 12–13

³⁸³ UNPFA, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 52–53

³⁸⁴ The Guardian, ‘They see no shame’: ‘honour’ killing video shows plight of Syrian women, 12 November 2018, [url](#)

³⁸⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁸⁶ ISW, ISIS Operating Areas: August 19, 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

report stated that most women and girls abducted and sexually enslaved by ISIS were forcibly disappeared after the terrorist organisation's downfall.³⁸⁸

In the past years, the violations against women by ISIS have been discussed extensively in the CoI reports focusing on the general situation of women in Syria³⁸⁹ or on the situation of Syria's Yazidi minority.³⁹⁰ For further information on these acts committed mostly in areas of the now-defunct 'caliphate', the reader should refer to these reports.

In the CoI report of 15 August 2019, the ISIS-related focus was on the situation of ISIS family members and Yazidi survivors (women, girls, and boys) transferred to Al-Hol camp from ISIS's former stronghold in Baghuz.³⁹¹ In August 2019, the living conditions of the camp's approximately 70 000 residents were reportedly 'deplorable'. Some 11 000 ISIS family members were separated from other residents and, according to many of them, denied access to food and medical care, while radicalised women had conducted several attacks against other residents. The Yazidis were reportedly suffering from the trauma of their experiences as well as from the communal stigma attached to atrocities committed against their minority, as well as from 'limited access to health care, psychological support and trauma therapy'.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ SNHR, 28,076 Females Have Been Killed in Syria since March 2011, 25 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 22–25

³⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 16–19;

³⁹⁰ UN Human Rights Council, 'They came to destroy': ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis', 15 June 2016, [url](#)

³⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 15–16

³⁹² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 15, 16

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Terms of Reference

Research questions:

- Have there been infringements against women or have women been threatened with infringements in areas under the control of a specific actor?
- What kind of infringements have been reported and how common and/or widespread these infringements are?
- What actors are responsible for the reported infringements?
- What factors in particular (age, marital status, family size, ethnic or religious background, social status, education, professional background, health status, displacement/refugee status, etc.) subject women to these infringements?
- Are women without a safety net more prone to be subjected to infringements? The lack of what type of safety net (e.g. protection by the tribe, the family or the male relative) in particular could subject women to infringements more easily?
- Is it possible for women to receive state protection or protection from local authorities against violations targeting women in particular?
- Is a woman seeking protection on her own in a different position than a woman seeking protection with the help of her male relative?

Regions covered:

- Areas under the control of the Government of Syria
- Kurdish-controlled areas
- Areas under control of anti-government groups (Idlib enclave, other areas under anti-government groups control)

Women in Syrian society:

- Is it possible for women to act independently, without the assistance of their husband or other male relative, in the Syrian society (to gain access to government services, official documents, and registrar's services; to gain access to education or work; or to travel/move inside or outside of Syria)?
- What factors can support or hinder women's possibilities to act independently in the Syrian society (e.g. social status; ethnic, religious, or tribal background)?
- Does the social status and capabilities of women vary on the basis of whether they are divorced, widowed, or unmarried?
- What is the (approximate) number of women-headed households in Syria?



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