



**IMPACT**  
Civil Society Research  
and Development

# Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society



**CTDC**  
Centre for Transnational  
Development and Collaboration



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR  
**PEACE & FREEDOM**

# **Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society**

A Research Based on Gender-Sensitivity  
Assessment of Syrian Civil Society Organisations

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This report has been prepared in collaboration with the Center for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC) and funded by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Thanks to all organizations and individuals who contributed to this research for their support and cooperation with IMPACT team.



# **IMPACT**

**Civil Society Research  
and Development**

Published by: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development

Keithstraße 10, 10787 Berlin

Not for sale

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Feb 2019

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IMPACT - Civil society research and development e.V. is a civil society organization established in Berlin in 2013 and has offices in Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

Supporting civil society is the core of IMPACT's mission. IMPACT is a catalyst for cooperation and exchange of experiences and ideas between local civil society actors themselves and with their international peers. In addition to that, it offers support to civil society actors and activists with a local-sensitive and holistic approach including assessment, research, training, long-term coaching and financial support. To that end, IMPACT grows and sustains a network of civil society actors, to jointly advocate for democracy, human rights and diversity.



CTDC is an intersectional multidisciplinary feminist consultancy with a goal to build communities and movements, through an approach that is both academic and grassroots-centred. CTDC attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice through its innovative-ly transformative programmes, which include mentorship, educational programmes, capacity building, trainings, and research. CTDC implements these programmes through consultancies, fiscal sponsorships, monitoring and evaluation, programme support and programme development, public lectures, workshops, and the creation of meaningful transnational networks of collaboration.

## Table of Contents

<b>ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Research Methods.....	10
2.1.1 Gender-Sensitivity Assessment Tool (G-SAT).....	10
2.1.2 Interviews.....	10
2.1.3 Focus Groups.....	11
2.1.4 Ethnographic Data.....	11
2.2 G-SAT and Focus Groups Sampling.....	12
2.3 Research: Challenges and Limitations.....	14
<b>3. GENDER ANALYSIS OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: A LOOK WITHIN.....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Lack of Gender Awareness.....	16
3.2 Lack of Internal Policies and Regulations.....	18
3.3 Immaturity of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).....	20
3.4 Financial and Economic Inequalities.....	21
3.5 Recreating Gendered Hierarchies.....	23
<b>4. EXTERNAL BARRIERS: WOMEN AND SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY.....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 Funding Restrictions.....	25
4.2 Lack of Context-Specific Interventions.....	27
4.3 Security Situation.....	28
4.4 Social Context.....	29
<b>5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>34</b>
Appendix I: Gender-Sensitivity Assessment Tool.....	34
Appendix II: Focus Group Questions.....	35
Appendix III: Interviews.....	36

## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- CBOs Community Based Organisations
- CEDAW The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- CSOs Civil Society Organisations
- CTDC Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration
- FGs Focus Groups
- G-SAT Gender-Sensitivity Assessment Tool
- GBV Gender Based Violence
- INGOs International non-governmental organisations
- NGOs Non-governmental organisations
- DSA Democratic Self Administration Areas
- SGBV Sexual and Gender Based Violence
- SRHR Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
- UN United Nations
- UNHCR United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees
- UNSCR 1325 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

## Executive Summary:

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Eight years into the Syrian crisis, Syrian civil society is still considered relatively nascent in comparison to civil society actors in neighbouring countries. Despite the fact that international agencies and donor governments have been repeatedly highlighting the importance of involving women in civil society organising, the voices of Syrian women in civil society and in the political arena are considered largely 'absent' (Suliman, 2018). However, the absence of such voices does not necessarily mean that Syrian women are not involved in civil society activism, or in political activism, or at the grassroots level. The importance of this research derives above all from the importance of including women's voices in civil society, as with the absence of their voices, their needs, opinions and perspectives are side-lined as well. In addition to that, the importance of including women into civil society and the importance of a civil society that satisfies the needs of women are often forgotten in mainstream positivist research. Our research has revealed that this absence of women's voices and experiences is due to a number of external and internal factors. Between October 2018 and January 2019, IMPACT in collaboration with the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC), have carried out an extensive literature review, social media analysis, and collected primary data, in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, through focus groups (FGs), interviews, ethnography and a quantitative gender-sensitivity assessment tool (G-SAT), to identify factors that hinder women's involvement in Syrian civil society (see Appendices I and II). In addition to that, the research has also aimed to understand the current status of Syrian women within civil society. This research aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the status of Syrian women within civil society, through identifying the main factors that hinder their involvement. The analysis highlighted the following main problems:

### Internal Factors

- **Lack of Gender Awareness:** There is a general lack of awareness within CSOs in relation to the meaning of gender and how to make their organisations gender-sensitive. It has become apparent that this lack of awareness is often reflected in organisational policies, which are often lacking in relation to addressing violence, bullying and harassment within the work place.
- **Lack of Internal Policies and Regulations:** Research revealed that the lack of internal policies and regulations is very much related to the security situation in CSOs' areas of operation. CSOs in more stable locations in terms of security were more likely to have internal policies and regulations in place. In areas where there is a lack of security CSOs seem to be responsive and flexible in their approach depending on the changing needs of their areas.



- **Immaturity of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** In addition to the security situation, donor priorities often prevent internal organisational development work from taking place. Donors' focus on funding activities with short-term results limits CSOs ability to develop organically. These policies can affect the involvement of women, as CSOs remain unable to improve internal conditions, which could result in an increase in women's involvement in CSOs.

- **Financial and Economic Inequalities:** Data showed that the management of finances influence women's access to jobs, and compromise their needs. Financial and economic inequalities affecting women's involvement are not related to gender pay gap issues, but are rather manifested in inequalities related to (1) access to employment, (2) position at the CSO, and (3) the lack of special provisions to accommodate for women's needs, including maternity leaves and childcare.

- **Recreating Gendered Hierarchies:** Based on this research, CSOs reinforce gender hierarchies in the workplace. These hierarchies operate on different levels, and these include (1) decision making, (2) positions and ranking, and (3) numbers and representation. Women are often excluded from decision-making positions, unless these positions were at an organisation that focuses solely on gender or women's rights. In addition to that, men are often granted leadership positions in the majority of organisations, and often in organisations headed by men, women find themselves completely excluded from major decision making conversations.

## External Factors

- **Funding Restrictions:** There is a misconception that major funding is being poured into women's organisations and organisations that focus on violence against women. Research has revealed that in fact only 0.5 per cent of international funding went into projects targeting women. In addition to that, the majority of those who work on gender and women related issues are volunteers. Funding restrictions also influence to a great degree organisations' ability to accommodate women's needs, as they rely on activity-based projects.

- **Lack of Context Specific Interventions:** Data also showed that many donors over the past few years have been trying to make their projects more gender-inclusive. Instead of funding women-

led organisations, donors have systematically added gender components in projects that are being implemented by male-led organisations. This reflects a massive inequality in funding allocations specifically relevant to the needs of women.

- **Security Situation:** The security situation has emerged as an important variable in determining the level of gender-sensitivity in Syrian CSOs. It has become apparent through research that the operations of CSOs are largely dependent on the situation and the context of their locations. In some countries for example legal restrictions meant limitations on CSOs activities. This has also meant that some organisations were more likely to have more gender-sensitive policies than others, or operated more flexibly to adapt to the local context.

- **Social Context:** Data has showed that the social context in neighbouring countries and in the different Syrian areas can have a great influence on women's involvement in CSOs. There are social values that hinder women's involvement in CSOs; however, these are different in different contexts.

This report will shed light on the role of women in Syrian civil society, through providing an overview of the current state of affairs, as well as identifying the main challenges that hinder women's involvement in civil society. For this reason, this report is divided into two main findings sections. The first section aims to provide an overview of gender-sensitivity within Syrian CSOs in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. This section will draw on findings from both the G-SAT and the qualitative data collection techniques. It will identify patterns related to women's involvement in CSOs, and contrast such patterns between the different areas, where Syrian CSOs are present. The second section will focus on the main challenges that hinder women's involvement in CSOs that were identified through reviewing the current status. Finally, the report will provide a set of concrete policy recommendations addressed to Syrian civil society actors and international stakeholders.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Since the eruption of the crisis in Syria, the number of Syrian CSOs more than tripled in size. According to IMPACT report on Syrian CSOs, between 2011 and 2017, alone, the number of founded organisations exceeded the total number of registered organisations in the country since 1959 (Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad, 2017). The number of organisations mapped by IMPACT in 2018 was 513, which reflects the level of activity at the level of civil society, however, the number of CSOs is in fact much higher. Despite the large number of Syrian CSOs, this does not mean that the newly emerging civil society has matured in comparison to civil society in neighbouring countries. This is particularly due to the total lack of non-regime affiliated CSOs allowed to operate in Syria prior to the 2011 popular uprising. With a history of repression, the Syrian regime restricted the work of CSOs, and the majority of CSOs operated as semi-governmental agencies (Alvarez-Ossoria, 2012, Khalaf, et. al, 2014). These semi-governmental CSOs mostly served the elites, and particularly elitist women (Abu-Assab, 2017). Moreover, CSOs and civil society structures were almost non-existent prior to the uprising; Al-Baath's authoritarian centralised governance ensured that civil society remains weak. In 2001, following the death of Hafiz Al-Assad Syria witnessed an interrupted attempt to liberalise the country, with Bashar allowing the establishment of several political forums during a period that was called Damascus Spring. The attempt to demonstrate its openness and modernity did not last through 2001 and Al-Baath regime started a wave of arrests and decided to close down the forums. At that time, some CSOs were allowed to work but those were nascent and operated under close regime scrutiny and with no announced political agendas (Khalaf, 2015).

Within these CSOs, women organisations existed, and women were perceived as 'represented within most professions', however these women were 'hand-picked' (Rabo, 1996: 163). This has massively shifted in the years following the uprising, and the crisis paved the way for diverse women's voices to be heard. Since 2011, Syrian women representing different confessions, sects, socio-economic, and political backgrounds became visibly active, challenging the voices of other regime-glorifying elitist Syrian women. Nonetheless, these courageous women have faced and still face many challenges and their involvement in CSOs and civil society activism is often undermined and challenged by several factors, many of which are due to the fact that Syrian civil society in general is considered relatively nascent.

The development of Syrian civil society in general has been also challenging given the prolonged crisis and security situation. To a great degree, Syrian CSOs have been reactionary to the situation on the ground, which resulted in a lack in future vision for most CSOs (Khalaf, 2014). Khalaf, et. al. argue that the growth of civil society actors in Syria is more likely to happen in areas outside of

regime control. Our previous research has demonstrated that more than 44 per cent of the sample were from areas outside of regime control, 26 per cent of the sample were set up outside Syria, and only 14 per cent were under regime control (Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad, 2017). Therefore, the majority of Syrian CSOs are, in fact, responsive to change, need-based, and reactionary to the security situation (Eleiba, et. al. 2016). Previous research has revealed that CSOs were ambiguous in relation to their vision (Khalaf, et. al. 2014). This also means that these CSOs were not limited or restricted by the regime, and for that reason, this allowed for different voices to emerge, such as those of women, who were oppressed under and by the regime. This, however, did not result in the creation of a strong feminist discourse within civil society, but rather resulted in the political discourse being directed mostly against the regime (Khalaf, et. al. 2014), overlooking gender and sexuality issues. It is important to highlight that after the eruption of the 2011 uprising, CSOs work has been focusing on countering the regime, and therefore women's issues and matters have been sidelined as they were not seen as a priority. Unfortunately, women's issues are not seen as political, within the broader context of the CSOs operations and larger society. This lack of understanding of women's issues as political issues has led civil society actors to deprioritise gender justice and women's issues, and to not perceive them as part and parcel of the political struggle. This marginalisation of women usually happens during times of political unrest across the globe.

To understand the extent of involvement of Syrian women in Syrian CSOs, in this research, we mainly attempted to answer the following four main research questions:

- 1- To what extent can we consider Syrian CSOs gender sensitive and inclusive?
- 2- What are the main internal and external challenges and barriers to gender justice within CSOs?
- 3- What are the opportunities available to allow for gender justice within the Syrian civil society?
- 4- What role does Syrian civil society play in relation to gender stereotypes within society?

To respond to these questions, we have built this research around the following axes:

- **Internal factors** including organisational policies and regulations, organisational structure, governance and decision-making mechanisms, women's positions within CSOs, gender-sensitive budgeting and project design and the type of work expected of women.
- **External factors** such as donor policies, agendas and interests, forced migration, security, culture and traditions, socially constructed gender stereotypes.

Despite the fact that some civil society definitions may consider it as “the space in between” where the political, economic and private spheres interact’ (Khalaf, 2015), this research is mainly concerned with groups registered and/or unregistered, which come to existence as CBOs, NGOs, INGOs, charities, foundations, associations, and unions. As we adopt this definition in this research, we recognise its limits, and yet we focus on assessing gender sensitivity and women’s involvement within these groups. In addition to this, we have shaped the methodology to respond to the research questions and the axes of this research. Interestingly, the data collected for this research highlighted that there are very few opportunities for women within Syrian civil society, and this is due to the main external and internal factors that we identified through the research. Further research is needed to look into and assess opportunities and situations, which can be utilised to increase Syrian women’s involvement in CSOs. Therefore, and before presenting the findings, the following section provides an overview of the methodology used for this research paper, and sheds light on the methods that were deemed most appropriate to address this topic.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

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The methodology for this research was designed during a two-day workshop in Berlin in October 2018. The workshop, which included IMPACT staff and CTDC experts, was conducted as ‘designing feminist research methodologies workshop’. During the workshop the most suitable feminist methods were agreed upon and data collection tools were designed to answer the research questions. The challenging part of designing this methodology was reconciling the tension between acknowledging the subjective experiences of women, and yet identifying patterns of similarities around gender-sensitivity and women’s roles within Syrian CSOs. This challenge, however, has been overcome during the analysis, as despite the clear differences there are stark similarities in relation to women’s involvement in Syrian civil society and CSOs inclusivity and sensitivity towards gender in the wider contexts, in which these CSOs exist. In other words, this research does not claim generalisability, neither does it assume that women’s experiences are homogenous, and instead focuses on the structures at play when it comes to women’s involvement in Syrian CSOs.

This research covered CSOs in and outside Syria, in order to understand the effect of the security situation on the gender aspects within organisations. In Syria, the research covered:

- Opposition held areas,
- Regime controlled areas,
- Democratic Self Administration (DSA) areas in al-Raqqa, Dayr al-Zawr and Al-Hasaka,
- Afrin and northern Aleppo countryside.

**Outside Syria it covered<sup>1</sup>:**

- Jordan,
- Lebanon,
- Turkey.

Covering these areas allowed us to identify that differences between CSOs working in the different areas were related to the security situation in each of the areas and the countries the research took place, rather than differences in relation to gender-sensitivity or to gender justice discourses within the organisations. For example, it has become clear that there is more space for civil society actors to shape their future and strategic visions in areas other than Jordan or in opposition-held unstable areas. It has also become clear that the activity of Syrian CSOs is most limited in Jordan. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to address such differences, and instead the findings presented here represent similarities and patterns across all areas in relation to gender justice and inclusion.

---

<sup>1</sup> We consider organisations that were founded and registered outside Syria but define themselves as Syrian and are Syria-focused as Syrian CSOs.

Data collection methods were standardised and used in all areas covered by the research, and these included an organisational G-SAT, face-to-face interviews, FGs and ethnographic data collected by 26 field researchers through observation. IMPACT's field research team had been responsible for collecting the majority of the data, and CTDC experts carried out a number of interviews with key stakeholders such as Syrian feminists, CSO employees, CSO experts and INGOs staff among others. The analysis of the data and the writing up of the report was carried out by CTDC.

The research methodology was designed through an intersectional feminist lens, which took into consideration the different variables that could potentially influence women's involvement into CSOs such as culture, traditions, political and security situation, donor agendas and policies, etc. This approach takes into account the fact that women's experiences are not homogenous and are influenced by several factors, and to understand the causes of oppression and gender injustice, it is important to understand the conditions that could potentially create it.

As previously explained several research methods were utilised to conduct this research, and in the following subsections, we present an overview of research methods, the sample and research limitations.

## 2.1 Research Methods

### 2.1.1 Gender-Sensitivity Assessment Tool (G-SAT)

During the research methods workshop in Berlin, CTDC experts collaboratively with IMPACT staff designed a gender-sensitivity assessment tool, which focuses on assessing the extent to which there are organisational provisions and structures that guarantee gender justice and inclusion and prevent gender discrimination and harassment (Appendix I: G-SAT). The sample for the G-SAT consisted of 33 CSOs in all the areas this research intended to cover. Despite the fact that the number of CSOs covered in these areas is not balanced, and might represent some data bias, the numbers are in fact reflective of the distribution of CSOs demonstrated in IMPACT's updated database of 513 CSOs that focus on Syria. In order to avoid data imbalance and bias, the data collected through the G-SAT will be treated as specific case studies, rather than representatives of CSOs in their respective areas. Data from the G-SAT had been crosschecked and contrasted to the qualitative data from interviews and FGs with the same organisations.

## 2.1.2 Interviews

Researchers have carried out interviews with around 19 Syrian men and women part of organisations, movements, and the political sphere and from all walks of life, and an international practitioner working on gender issues. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and were designed in the form of a conversation that is based on creating a shared coequal status between the interviewer and the interviewee (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Some open-ended questions were also used because they are more flexible and allow respondents to provide more depth (Cargan, 2007). Interview notes were taken, and the interviews were not tape-recorded, as recording can sometimes push participants to censor their speech (Gobo, 2008). All interviews and conversations took place in Arabic, however, some the non-Syrian practitioner working for international organisations preferred to speak in English.

## 2.1.3 Focus Groups

Field researchers carried out 43 FGs across all the different areas, and these FGs were intended to understand the extent to which organisations are gender sensitive and to observe interactions within these organisations as well. The FGs took place on the premises of the selected organisations and included a number of staff members representing different positions within their respective organisations. Six FGs took place in Turkey, three in Lebanon, two in Jordan, three in al-Raqqa, six in Idlib, six in Northern Aleppo Countryside, six in Western Aleppo Countryside, four in DSA areas and seven in regime controlled areas. The sample for these FGs, similar to the G-SAT, was 33 organisations, some of which participated in more than one focus group. In addition to focus group notes, field researchers provided notes and comments on the interaction and group dynamic between different staff members (see Appendix II for focus group questions).

## 2.1.4 Ethnographic Data

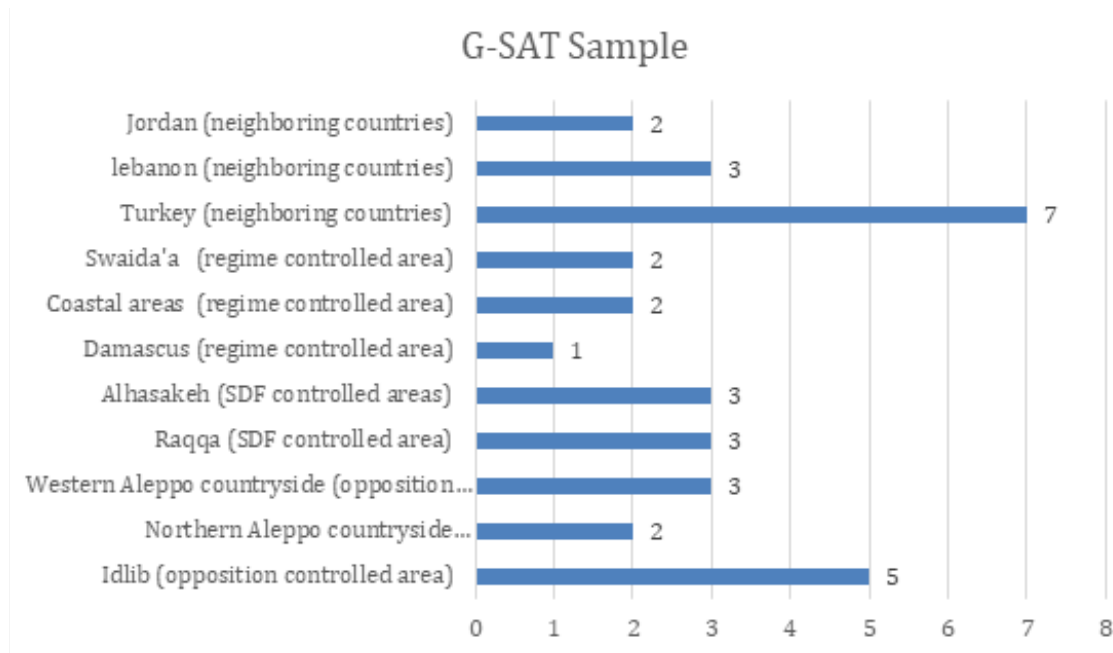
Ethnographic data included in this research includes (1) field notes provided by field researchers, and (2) CTDC's research data based on notes and observations through in-depth and hands-on work with at least a dozen Syrian CSOs over the past five years. During site visits and project implementation, observations were documented in the form of field notes. This method has been used to account for 'unplanned elements of... field experience' (Bradburd, 1998: xiii). This unplanned, or flexible, type of ethnography is often based on a 'series of unplanned ethnographic encounters



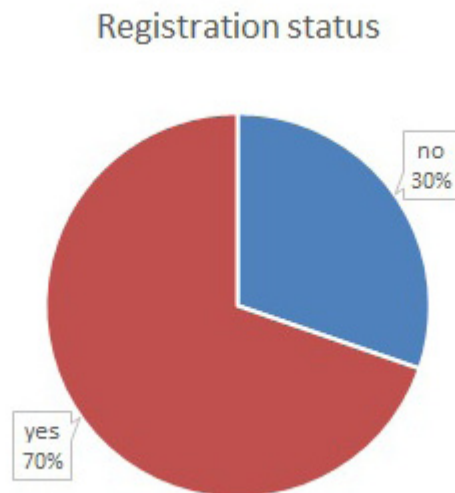
which simply happen en route to the focal encounters intended to take place’ during fieldwork (Tommaselli, 2005: 8). This ethnography focused on dialogue and conversational exchanges between the researcher and the target group, rather than mere observations of conditions and events. This use of ethnographic data is particularly useful as a feminist method as it gives voice to research participants (Sanger, 2003) to express their realities in their own words. Moreover, some interaction has been observed particularly in the context of mixed-sex workshops and training courses, and some of the data has been used for this research report.

## 2.2 G-SAT and Focus Groups Sampling

Focus groups and G-SAT had identical samples, which were selected out of the 513 CSOs surveyed by IMPACT in 2018. Initially 40 CSOs were selected for the assessment, however, due to the unstable security situation, time limitations and unwillingness of some CSOs to participate in research about this topic, the sample was reduced to 33. Sample selection was shaped by a number of factors and variables that were taken into consideration, and these include CSOs’ (1) type of work, (2) size, (3) age, (4) area control, (5) areas demographics and (6) diversity.

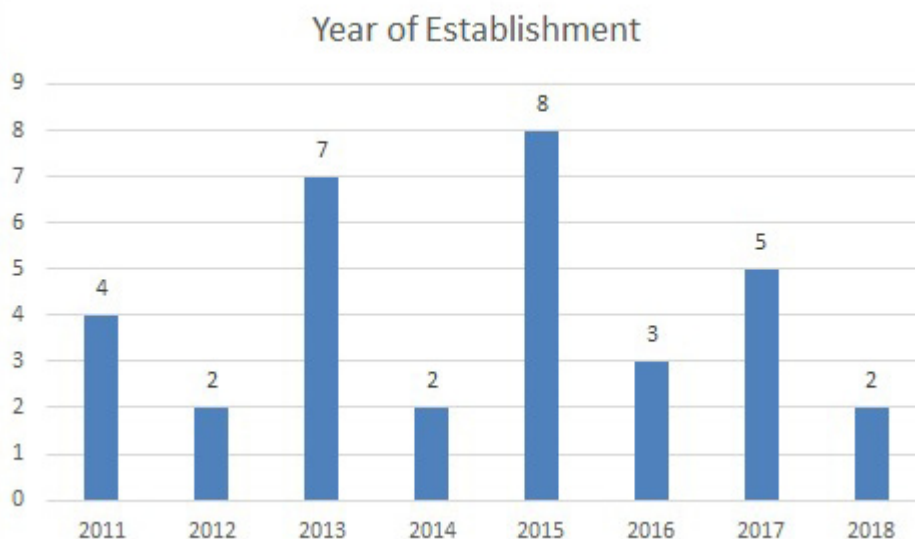


The largest number of CSOs sampled for this research came from Turkey and opposition controlled areas, while the lowest number came from Damascus, the regime's stronghold. Of the sample of 33, 23 are officially registered, which makes a total of 70 per cent of the sample.



The majority of selected CSOs were at least four years of age, 23 out of 33 per cent of them were founded between 2011 and 2015. The size of CSOs within the sample varied, with the majority of them 12/33 with a team size between 11 and 25, here is a further breakdown of team sizes:

- seven of them with a team size between 51 and 100,
- four of them with a team size between 31 and 50,
- three of them with a team size between 101 and 200,
- three of them with a team size between 200 and 350,
- two with a team size between 21 and 30,
- and the remaining two between 6 and 10.





In this research, we have excluded CSOs that focus on media, as an assessment of their gender-sensitivity would require a different type of work that is more in-depth and focuses on their products, their internal policies and regulations, as well as an assessment of their discourse. The sample included CSOs working in different fields, and also included organisations that focus on gender and women’s issues. However, due to sampling and other feminist methodological considerations, this research has limitations and it is important to address them before we present the findings.

## 2.3 Research: Challenges and Limitations

As part of ethical feminist research, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the inevitable limitations and biases of social research in general. Words, terms, concepts and discourses are subject to subjective interpretations and do not necessarily hold the same meanings for everyone. One of the major limitations of this research is the concept of ‘gender’. It has become clear through this research that the majority of research participants do not necessarily understand what the term means. Gender has often been associated with women’s rights and issues. Others linked gender to human rights. The major limitation of this research is that G-SAT participants might have provided inadequate answers due to their lack of understanding of terms and words used. For instance, the FGs showed that words such as bullying and harassment were often misunderstood. Similarly, some participants misunderstood the question on policies and internal regulations. In order to overcome this limitation, data from the G-SAT was crosschecked with the FGs notes and were cleaned accordingly.

In addition to that, there were other limitations relevant to this piece of research, and these include:

- 1- The unwillingness of some organisations to collaborate and participate in research,
- 2- The unstable security situation in the majority of areas inside Syria, limited access,
- 3- Time limitations, as this project was limited by tight deadline,
- 4- The rapidly changing situation on the ground means that these findings are time bound,
- 5- Participating organisations might have concealed some information to seem fair, just and non-discriminatory.

The use of mixed methods, also known as triangulation, however, adds 'rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to an inquiry' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 5). It has also been argued that 'by combining multiple methods it is possible to elicit new insights into the causes of and consequences of beliefs and behaviours' (Axinn and Pearce, 2006: 1). For these reasons, the analysis of this data relied primarily on a feminist interpretive theoretical framework, which utilised people's words to reflect their realities to the best of the authors' knowledge and abilities.

### 3. GENDER ANALYSIS OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: A LOOK WITHIN

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Despite the fact that Syrian civil society has gained some attention by researchers, not a single one utilises feminist methodologies or provides a gender analysis for the current state of affairs in relation to Syrian CSOs. Moreover, the majority of work on Syrian women's role in civil society either highlights the role women play or the absence of women within Syrian CSOs. As both descriptions are inadequate, this research offers an alternative view of gender and Syrian civil society- a view that is enriched through an intersectional approach to analysis. In order to assess whether Syrian CSOs are gender sensitive, in this section we provide thematic analysis for internal factors that emerged through the research process, and these revolve around organisational policies and regulations, organisational structure, governance and decision-making mechanisms, women's positions within CSOs, gender-sensitive budgeting and project design and the type of work expected of women. The following sections are divided based on the main themes that emerged across the different sets of data collected for this research.

### 3.1 Lack of Gender Awareness

Gender, as a concept, is relatively new to the majority of Arabic-speakers, including the majority of Syrians. As it has a loose discourse in Arabic language, its understanding is prone to interpretations, confusion and misconceptions. It has become clear through this research that the majority of participants, from the G-SAT, FGs and interviews, did not understand what the term actually means. As a term, research revealed, it is often mainly associated with women's rights issues, women's empowerment and women's participation. However, associations and misconceptions are due to CSOs wanting to appease to donors and funders, without understanding the concept, what it means and its usefulness. For example, one FG participant stated that he believes in gender justice and equality, but believed that some roles are inappropriate for women. Such contradictions reflect people's inability to relate to and apply such concepts to their work, in a manner that is genuine and consistent with their values and beliefs. An interviewee representing a human rights organisation that focuses on gender said: 'we do gender because it is important for the donor. I do not think women need to claim any rights, they have got it all, and they have it better than us<sup>2</sup>.' This lack of gender awareness that was also demonstrated by people who claim that their work focuses on gender hinders women's meaningful involvement in Syrian CSOs, and creates a negative discourse around gender justice and equality, as often it is treated as a 'cash cow<sup>3</sup>' according to an international practitioner, and is perceived as 'attractive to donors<sup>4</sup>' according to a CEO of a Syrian human rights organisation.

Interviewees from women's organisations and from feminist activist backgrounds reiterated the grave need for gender awareness trainings, as the majority of 'people you meet on a day-to-day basis do not understand what the term means<sup>5</sup>'. When asked to define gender, the majority of interviewees from all backgrounds believed that gender is equality between men and women. Others said that gender is the sex you are born with, and others said it is reflective of women's lives. Whereas people from CSOs background recognised the term when they heard it, the majority of them were unable to define it. This is particularly alarming in light of the fact that this lack of understanding and awareness was also present when people were asked about sexual harassment and bullying.

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2 Interviewee 1.  
3 Interviewee 2.  
4 Interviewee 3.  
5 Interviewee 4.

Data from the G-SAT showed that 24 per cent of participating organisations claimed that they have clear written policies around bullying and sexual harassment, which are known to all and are applied. However, when this data was crosschecked with data from the FGs, it became very clear that participants did not know what bullying<sup>6</sup> and harassment<sup>7</sup> are in the first place. Therefore, it is very likely that the majority of organisations, estimated at 80 per cent of our sample, do not have policies that address bullying and harassment, neither in relation to prevention, protection or prosecution<sup>8</sup> (3Ps), elements essential for avoiding human trafficking and exploitation. Addressing bullying and harassment within CSOs contributes to the creation of safe working environments for women and other marginalised groups, who are often the target of such actions. Whereas participants were not able to show an understanding of bullying and harassment as concepts, they were also unable to identify specific behaviours as bullying or harassment, which does not only reflect a lack of understanding of the terms themselves, but also reflects a lack of understanding that some behaviour is considered bullying and harassment.

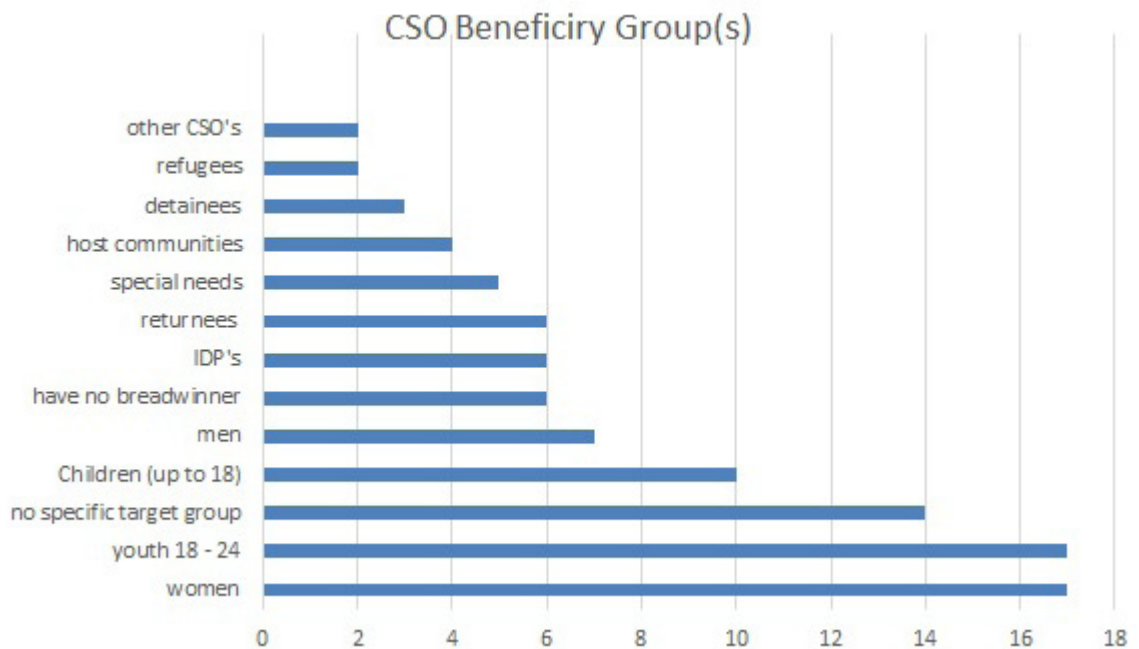


6 We consider bullying as a form of harassment, and we define it as a form of violence and abuse directed towards an individual or a group, by an individual or a group who have power over their targets of bullying. Bullying is done through teasing, banter, physical assault, cyber assault, name-calling, damaging and stealing belongings, threats and intimidation, and emotional abuse through passive aggressive behaviour for example. The difference between harassment and bullying is that bullying as a type of harassment is considered more repetitive and systematic in nature, whereas other types of harassment may not necessarily be repetitive.

7 We define harassment as a range of discriminatory behaviours that are deemed to be offensive, unwanted and threatening in nature for the recipient of the action. Harassment is not only discriminatory behaviour based on gender or sexuality, but also extends to race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical and mental ability, among others. Harassment can take many forms, including verbal, physical, sexual, unwanted implicit gestures such as giving gifts and objects, and sexually suggestive language and pictures. Harassment is often conducted by individuals or institutions in positions of power, over their employees, colleagues, beneficiaries, etc. Harassment may have a grave impact on its recipients, and these may include affecting an individual's work performance and creating an unsafe and hostile work environment. Harassment is sometimes used as a condition of employment and/or access to services.

8 For more on the 3P Paradigm in relation to human trafficking, see Cho (2016) Report on the 3P Anti-trafficking Policy Index 2015.

This lack of understanding and awareness of terms and phenomena that are essential for any work around gender has been one of the main findings and challenges of this research, as explained in section 2.3. Despite the fact that as many as 17 out of 33 CSOs expressed that their main beneficiary group are women, more than 30 of the participating organisations' FGs demonstrated that there is a general lack of awareness in relation to gender. Despite the fact that some of these organisations do not have a main goal of changing gender stereotypes, and do target women through relief and humanitarian activities and services, this lack of understanding reflects that these organisations do not take into consideration the gendered experiences of women.



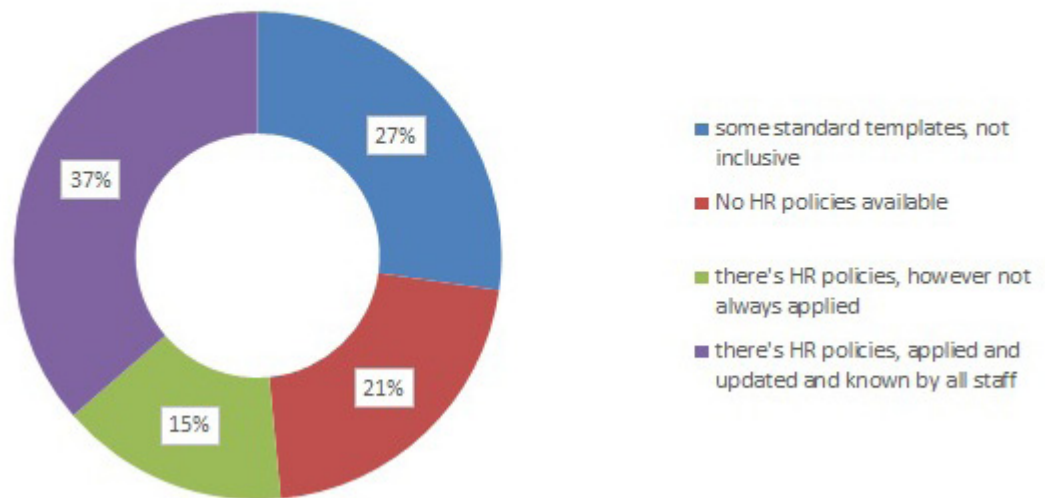
In addition to this lack of gender awareness, and the overall lack of awareness in relation to bullying and harassment, one of the main challenges affecting gender justice on the organisational level is the lack of appropriate internal policies and regulations that address gender issues on the organisational level.

### 3.2 Lack of Internal Policies and Regulations

There are several reasons why CSOs might not have adequate internal policies and regulations in place, and our data shows that this is linked to a great degree to the security situation in the areas where CSOs operate. It became apparent that CSOs operating in areas that are deemed relatively safe and stable are more likely to have internal policies and regulations in place, with the more

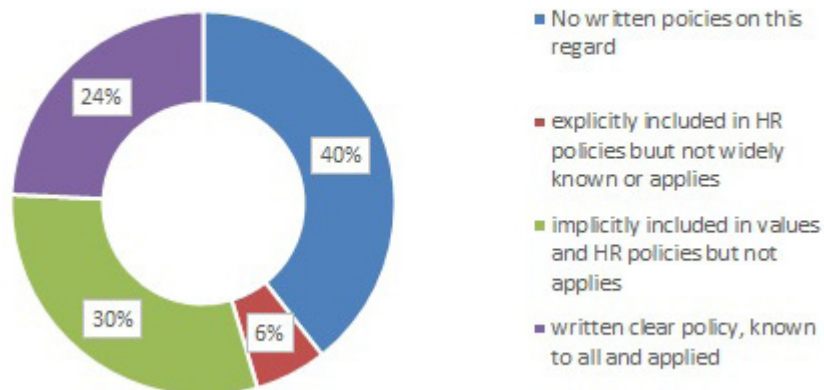
advanced ones being in Turkey, Lebanon and regime controlled areas. Despite these differences, it has become clear that the majority of participating organisations do not have policies or regulations that could potentially ensure gender justice at the organisational level. For instance, whereas 37 per cent of participating organisations claimed that they have clear applied HR policies, which are known to all staff members and are inclusive, the majority, consisting of 63 per cent, did not have such clear policies.

HR policies



In addition to that, only eight of the 33 participating organisations, representing around 24 per cent of the sample, stated that they have clearly applied policies to address bullying and harassment and that those are known to all staff members.

Organizational bullying and harrasement Policies





However, analysis showed that out of the eight, which stated that they have clear policies, at least three of them had staff members express their lack of awareness of the existence of such policies and regulations during the FGs. It is important to note here that G-SAT data predominantly reflects the views and opinions held by the managers at these CSOs, and therefore bias that was revealed through crosschecking information confirms that such policies are not being treated as a priority and there is not much of an understanding of the need to have such policies in place. One of the FG participants said: 'policies are not as important as a person's belief system, which would prevent them from such deeds.' Almost all FG participants expressed that they all trust each other in their respective organisations and that they are all on the same page, and that alone should be treated as a guarantee preventing and protecting from bullying and harassment, for example. One interviewee<sup>9</sup> said: 'we only heard of our internal policies and regulations at a donor's meeting.' Another interviewee said: 'do you think that people would report bullying and harassment? People fear for their livelihoods<sup>10</sup>.'

During an interview, an interviewee said: 'in my last job at [CSO name concealed for safety], I was being bullied and my manager used to use a lot of sexual innuendos in conversations and always made me feel bad for not playing along with it. I could not report it, because I should report it to the board, but he is friends with board members.<sup>11</sup>'

This shows that even when there are policies and regulations for reporting bullying and harassment, these are often inadequate. In addition to that, many of the internal policies and regulations that exist, only exist to satisfy donor requirements and regulations, rather than due to an understanding of the importance of such policies or to be of benefit to employees prone to harassment and bullying. For this reason, other than the lack of understanding of sexual harassment and bullying within participating CSOs in general, there is also a total denial of their existence by staff members at different CSOs. This could be due to the continuous security pressures on some organisations, which does not allow them time to self-reflect on their work and develop internally, and also pushes them to be responsive to the situation in the moment and prevents them from having visions for the future. And, the lack of policies could also be due to the fact that Syrian CSOs started existing in hundreds only in recent years, and are still in the process of defining their own working mechanisms, policies and procedures.

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9 Interviewee 5.

10 Interviewee 6.

11 Interviewee 7.

### 3.3 Immaturity<sup>12</sup> of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

As previously explained in the introduction, Syrian CSOs have started emerging in large numbers following the uprising in 2011. The emergence of such CSOs was the result of needs and in response to needs. With the changing security situation in some areas, these needs are in constant change, and thus prevent CSOs from developing organically and in a way that is sustainable. A large number of Syrian CSOs have broad visions, which allow them to do all types of work, without adequate or appropriately specialised skills and expertise. This has been creating a problem in relation to the organic organisational growth of these CSOs preventing them from levels of maturity that could potentially allow them to develop policies and working mechanisms that are more gender-sensitive and inclusive.

Syrian CSOs have not had the chance to mature well enough for them to develop their attitudes around the management and development of their organisations. The majority of funding is granted to CSOs on activity bases. In addition to that, the majority of funding is granted through international implementing partners, who focus on value for money and activity based budgets, rather than operational funds, which are necessary to allow for such growth. This, undoubtedly, has an impact on women's access to and participation in CSOs. For instance, an interviewee stated: 'it is not that we do not want to hire women, or that we are discriminatory towards women, but we cannot afford maternity leaves for example. It is sometimes easier to hire men<sup>13</sup> .' Another interviewee said: 'I was rejected by many jobs when I was pregnant. No one thought it was problematic to not be hired due to pregnancy<sup>14</sup>.'

Whereas this lack of maturity within CSOs that prevents them from organisational development, financial issues should not be perceived as the only problem in relation to involving women within CSOs. Other factors such as culture, misconceptions and societal expectations play a major role in hindering women's participation in Syrian CSOs. Although this will be discussed in section (4.4), it is important to point out here that some social misconceptions around gender are copied to a great extent into organisational cultures. Despite the fact that this indicates a lack of maturity within CSOs, it also indicates that the need to raise awareness and understandings of gender issues from within is as, if not more, important as operational funds. Improving organisational values and making them more inclusive to all segments of society and gender-sensitive is an essential

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12 We have chosen to use the term 'maturity' in particular, as we think of maturity as an organic process and change, rather than change instigated by external actors.

13 Interviewee 9.

14 Interviewee 11.

component that would help Syrian CSOs reach a point of growth that would allow them to change organisational cultures and behaviours. If values as such improve, CSO employees would not only be making a living, but would also become agents of change within their own communities, holding a message for inclusion, diversity and gender justice.

### 3.4 Financial and Economic Inequalities

The fight to reduce the pay gap between men and women do not seem to be a problem within Syrian CSOs in general. However, financial management issues do influence women's involvement in CSOs and their access to work within CSOs. With very few CSOs having operational budgets, very few of them are able to accommodate for women's differential needs, including pregnancies, maternity leaves and child care. In addition to discrimination at the point of entry to CSOs for some women, the lack of support to mothers also makes it difficult for them to manage their time between work and their familial obligations. As the majority of CSOs are reliant on funding to sustain themselves, funding bodies often times do not allow for gender-sensitive budgeting.

During one of the interviews, an interviewee expressed her outrage for a salary reduction, due to donor requirements to reduce budgets<sup>15</sup>. The woman, who was the only woman in the team, was the only one within her organisation, whose salary was reduced. The justification for the decrease in salary was justified as part of organisational restructuring, however, the affected by this restructuring was the woman. It is often the case that women are the most affected by economic adversity and are expected to manage with less access to resources in comparison to men. During another interview, a male interviewee expressed that it is fair for women to earn less, because they do not have financial responsibilities towards their families<sup>16</sup>. It is important to note here that apart from that one occasion, none of the women interviewed complained of a pay gap between them and their male-counterparts. G-SAT data also demonstrated that there is not evident gender discrimination in terms of salaries, but discrimination is more likely to take place at the point of accessing a job. Only one participating organisation stated that there is discrepancy in the salaries between men and women in the same position. Over 73 per cent of participating organisations explained that salaries are based on positions and experience and that gender does not play a role in salary scales. It is, however, important to note that, for these organisations in particular, salaries are often approved by funders. It is equally important to note here that pay gap has not surfaced as an issue on the feminist agenda in the Middle East yet, as most efforts now within Syrian CSOs are being

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15 Interviewee 8.

16 Interviewee 12.

directed towards reducing discrimination at the point of entry into CSOs to enable women to participate in civil society activism <sup>17</sup> in the first place.

It has become clear, through ethnographic data and primary data collected for the purpose of this research, that women are often excluded from work in the field of finance and are not considered capable of handling financial work. There is a wide range of research on the reasons behind women's systematic exclusion from specific professions and roles. Some of those referred to social stereotypes and misconceptions about women's abilities, others highlighted the impact of the schooling system in pushing women towards human and social sciences, and others simply explained it through patriarchy and class (Afshar, 1987; Agarwal, 1997; Cagatay & Erturk, 2004; Charles, 1993; Darwazeh, 2002; Moghadam, 1995, 1998 & 2003). It is beyond the scope of this research to address these issues independently, however, data from this research has revealed that this exclusion is also evident within CSOs. The absence of women in that field within these organisations also plays a major role in the budgets not being gender-sensitive. This, also, highlights how cultural misconceptions and stereotypes often seep into organisational cultures. For instance, an interviewee said: 'women are not good with math, they cannot handle finances <sup>18</sup>.' A woman interviewee, who holds the position of an administrative assistant, said: 'I have a degree in accounting and I am a certified accountant, and the only job I got was an administrative assistant. I know I am more qualified than the finance manager <sup>19</sup>.' In addition to this highlighted inequality within CSOs in relation to access to specific positions, research has also revealed that the majority of currently existing organisational structures for CSOs recreate gendered hierarchies and subordinates women even further through projects that reinforce gender stereotypes and through discrimination in relation to access to employment within CSOs.

### 3.5 Recreating Gendered Hierarchies

So far, we have highlighted issues that are considered internal to organisations. However, this binary between the external and the internal is not accurate enough to describe the situation. The external and the internal oftentimes intersect and reinforce and shape each other, and the divide between both is not clear-cut. As previously explained, it has often been the case that workers at CSOs express

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17 In this report, we mainly focus on institutionalised civil society activism done through CSOs, rather than the grassroots local activism that take place and often go unnoticed or unheard of. We are by no means limiting women's role in civil society to the one that is institutionalised, however, this report focuses on organisations, and there is room for more research to be carried out around the role women play outside institutionalised CSOs.

18 Interviewee 10.

19 Interviewee 13.

views that are contradictory to how they present themselves to the outside world, and that are also contradictory to how they would like to see themselves. It became apparent to us, through the data directly collected for this project, and also through CTDC’s work on organisational development with several Syrian CSOs, that CSOs’ staff, and particularly men, recreate gender hierarchies within their organisations. It has come to our attention that in some organisations women face intimidation techniques by some men, bullying, undermining and infantilising and on some occasions harassment—these men are often in more senior positions, which amplifies the gendered power dynamic.

Despite the fact that gender-sensitivity should not only be measured quantitatively, the G-SAT showed that with the average size of our sample CSOs being 71 members of staff, the average number of women working for these CSOs is 28, which means that women barely constitute 40 per cent of members at the participating CSOs. It is also important to add here that these estimates are not totally accurate, as three out of the participating CSOs reported that they have all women staff, which means that the actual average number is lower. In CSOs that do not explicitly focus on gender and women’s issues, women are not represented enough neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. During an interview with a woman, who works in a human rights organisation, she said: ‘there are definitely more men in some fields. Human rights issues are often dealt with by lawyers, and those lawyers are often men <sup>20</sup>.’ During another interview, a woman interviewee said: ‘they bring us to meetings, give us positions, and do not let us speak. It feels like we are there for them and not to represent ourselves<sup>21</sup>.’



20 Interviewee 14.

21 Interviewee 15.

In addition to harassment and bullying and the attempts to exclude women from CSOs, women within CSOs are rarely found in leadership positions, unless the CSO identifies itself as feminist and/or its work mainly focuses on gender justice and women's issues. One interviewee, whose background is working on women-focused projects, said: 'You will not believe how much funding is going to men, who pretend to be working on women's issues. They get the positions, we do the work, and they get the credit again for being men <sup>22</sup>.'

There are also notable internal issues around gender-sensitivity within Syrian CSOs related to the type of services and/or support they offer women. Livelihood and development projects that focus on women, sometimes, reinforce stereotypes about gender roles. For instance, projects that focus on what is perceived as feminine work for women, such as sewing and tailoring, hairdressing and cooking create stereotypes about the roles expected from women within society. This example demonstrates how internal organisational cultures also influence and shape society the same way they are influenced and shaped by society, making the relationship between the external and the internal equally influential. One interviewee said: 'some of these organisations pretend to be supporting women, but all they're doing is pushing women out of the public sphere and out of decision making positions, and the problem is these men keep getting more funding to choose for women the work they see as appropriate and suitable for women <sup>23</sup>.'

The themes discussed in this section have focused mainly on internal dynamics and factors that influence women's involvement in Syrian CSOs, on the organisational level. Outside of these organisations, there are also external factors playing a role in shaping internal and external dynamics, and these also greatly limit women's options in relation to involvement in CSOs. The next section will zoom out of the internal and in to the external, in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that play a role in shaping women's access to and involvement in Syrian CSOs.

#### 4. EXTERNAL BARRIERS: WOMEN AND SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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A gender analysis of the position of Syrian women within Syrian CSOs requires an analysis of the external factors that operate outside of organisations. These external factors include donor policies, agendas and interests, forced migration, security, culture and traditions, socially constructed gender stereotypes. These factors were identified through a contextual analysis of the situation in Syria, in addition to primary data collected for the purpose of this research through interviews, FGs, G-SAT and ethnographic data. Analysis has revealed four major areas of influence over women's

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22 Interviewee 16.

23 Interviewee 17.

role within Syrian CSOs: (1) funding restrictions imposed on CSOs, (2) non-context specific interventions, (3) security situation, and (4) the social context. It is important to recognise here that all of these factors intersect and are interrelated, and often when one was brought up the other came into the conversation spontaneously. Funding restrictions are sometimes associated to non-context specific non-intersectional interventions, which treat situations as models to copied everywhere without taking the context into consideration. The following sub-sections will go into the details of these factors, which are considered the most important, but not the only, factors influencing women's involvement in Syrian CSOs.

## 4.1 Funding Restrictions

Funding restrictions manifest themselves in three main ways in relation to women's involvement in Syrian CSOs: (1) through the lack of funding for women-led organisations, (2) through restrictions on organisational operational funds, and (3) through having specific strategies for what they see as a priority. Whereas funding has the potential to open doors and opportunities for women, it could also be a hindrance to women's involvement in Syrian CSOs. As argued by Alrifai and Dore-Weeks (2018), 'there is general consensus among aid practitioners that women and women-led organisations have easier access into conflict affected communities, recent available data shows only 0.3% of international funding in response to the Syrian crisis went to Syrian women led organisations in 2014.' In addition to that, only 0.5 per cent of international funding to Syria went into projects targeting violence against women (ibid). This demonstrates that in fact, unlike what some organisations suggested in interviews and FGs, very little funding is directed towards gender-specific projects. In addition to that, organisations that focus on women and gender are often underfunded and the majority of their members are unpaid volunteers. These trends have been identified through a mapping of gender-specific projects and women led organisations working within the Syrian context.

This lack of funding to women led and gender-specific organisations sends the message that gender is not high on the agenda for donor governments and gender inclusion is an added value rather than a central part of the struggle for freedom for the Syrian people. In addition to that, most donors do not allow budgets for women-specific needs, and there is a general lack of operational funding support. For instance, the majority of donors would not allow for expenditure on child care, and would not consider breastfeeding breaks for mothers, and would not even think of allowing budgets for maternity leaves, The majority of funding, unfortunately do not take the

needs of women into account, and thus donor 'allowable' budgets are more often than not gender insensitive and exclusionary to some women more than others. Therefore, positions at CSOs become more accessible to women, whose economic backgrounds would allow them to afford child care, or to women who have support systems that would enable them to work outside their homes, or to single women until married. Thus, these funding restrictions pave the way for discrimination against women at the point of entry and prevent social mobility, as people from impoverished backgrounds become less able to access employment opportunities within CSOs. Funding restrictions as such have detrimental effects on women's position within Syrian CSOs.

To add to the abovementioned elements of how funding restrictions influence women's role within CSOs, donor governments often have their own funding strategies, which do not necessarily reflect CSOs priorities and needs. An interviewee from a women-led organisation said: 'there is very little funding for organisations that focus solely on gender and/or on women's issues. Donors are more interested in making gender a component of projects, rather than funding it as a stand-alone project. Most government funding for gender goes to large international organisations, which in turn sub-contract and sub-grant local organisations to do their activities for them, and the locals do not get as much funding to actually lead their gender projects and activities <sup>24</sup>'. Others have pointed out that funding restrictions do not allow for gender-sensitive provisions within budgets.

Donor restrictions and funding issues play a major role in women's ability to be involved in CSOs. It has also emerged through this research that women's and gender-specific organisations suffer from lack of funding, and that funded interventions are not always context specific, and often negatively affect the work of feminists and women's issues within CSOs. There emerged through data a difference between women-led organisations and organisations that claim to address gender, but are not women-led, in relation to access to funding and funding options available to them. This is also reflective of Alrifai and Dore-Weeks (2018) finding through their assessment that only 0.5 per cent of Syria funding went into projects targeting violence against women, and only 0.3 per cent went to women-led Syrian organisations. The provision of funding to organisations that address gender, as part of their work, is mainly due to the widely held belief that including men in work around gender is effective. Research, however, has revealed that this strategy often increases gender inequality, and pushes women into minor roles with CSOs. This has become evident in at least ten of the interviews, as the shift in funding to what is deemed as gender-sensitive initiatives,



rather than projects that address gender inequality through focusing on women, has meant that projects not led by women often ignore women's needs, and use broad gender 'indicators', which rely on methodologically erroneous quantitative measures, as a way to demonstrate their inclusion and gender-sensitivity.

## 4.2 Lack of Context-Specific Interventions

The lack of context-informed interventions around gender has emerged as one of the major themes during interviews. Interestingly, men in CSOs expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that work on gender is being imposed on their CSOs<sup>25</sup>, while women interviewees whose work is mostly on gender expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of funding for gender justice and women centred projects<sup>26</sup>. This contradiction between men and women interviewees demonstrates that donor funding for gender is not being adequately distributed nor channelled effectively to address gender. Young women expressed their dissatisfaction with the involvement of non-context specific experts in gender programming within CSOs and have highlighted that this involvement is often at the expense of their work within CSOs. One interviewee said: 'we were once in gender awareness workshop, with men and women, and the men were taking more space than the women within the workshop. During the break, I informed the trainer, who was from non-Arabic speaking background that the women were feeling uncomfortable and that what men are saying are offensive to women and are not feminist. She looked at me and said: do not mention the 'f' words in front of men, they do not like it. She was referring to feminism<sup>27</sup>.' The same interviewee expressed her dissatisfaction with such approaches and gave more examples about how the involvement of non-Arabic speakers in gender programming comes often at the expense of silencing women and impeding the feminist cause.

In addition to this silencing, women interviewees also expressed their dissatisfaction with the approaches of gender experts brought in by international funders and organisations. It has been reported that gender experts, who are not Arabic speakers, often fail in actually raising awareness around gender issues, especially because their work does not reflect the situation within the specific context of Syrian CSOs. For example, it has emerged through interviews and ethnographic data that international gender experts often and mainly refer to international mechanisms to discuss women's rights issues and gender equality, such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325, and fail to point

25 Interviewees 1, 3, 9, 10, 12 and 19.

26 Interviewees 4, 6, 8, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20.

27 Interviewee 16.

out gender inequalities and discrimination in a way that practically demonstrates and calls out discriminatory practices on the bases of gender. In addition to that, women within CSOs feel that such experts give more attention to the men working on the subject, rather than the women. One interviewee said: ‘when we have meetings with donors or international partner organisations, the women often give most attention to men, as if they are celebrating their achievements in relation to gender. They forget that most of this work is in fact carried out by women and women’s labour is appropriated by those same men, who use bullying and intimidation techniques to silence women within their organisations <sup>28</sup>.’ Moreover, this has also highlighted that much of the gender work being carried out does not necessarily reflect the interests and needs of women.

UNSCR 1325 was also brought up during interviews in relation to international mechanisms’ failure and inadequacy when it comes to addressing gender and women’s specific needs and issues. Interviewees also exhibited a lack of understanding of international mechanisms and one interviewee said: ‘these conventions and resolutions are being used as euphemisms and clichés by the majority of CSOs<sup>29</sup>.’ Another interviewee highlighted the fact that resolutions, such as UNSCR 1325, do not address women’s issues in a way that is sensitive to conflict contexts, and instead single out women as the only segment of society affected by conflict. In her own words: ‘the UNSCR 1325 does not mean much within the Syrian context, CSOs started using such terms to brand themselves as gender inclusive, however, such resolutions do not change the reality of the crisis on the ground <sup>30</sup>.’ Whereas the majority of feminist women expressed their dissatisfaction with international mechanisms, they also highlighted that some Syrian women also adopt such mechanisms in their work, leading many of them to carry out work that is de-contextualised and that copies frameworks that do not apply to the situation on the ground. This, as expressed by many, leads to the emergence of an elitist feminist discourse that is not intersectional and does not take into account women from different backgrounds. This, however, is not to say that all forms of interventions must be stopped, and are not useful at all, as they despite some of their negative repercussions, open the door for some women to become active and engaged in feminist struggles. Instead, this means that the current situation prompts actions and reforms in relation to the way interventions are being carried out. Context specificity and the situation on the ground as themes were repeatedly emphasised by both FG participants and interviewees, and research has revealed that the security situation in specific areas have prevented women from full participation in CSOs in their respective areas.

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28 Interviewee 8.

29 Interviewee 20.

30 Interviewee 17.

### 4.3 Security Situation

The prolonged crisis, and the ever-changing security situation in Syria, has not only greatly influenced women's involvement in CSOs, but have also hindered the internal development and growth of Syrian CSOs in general, as explained in section (3.3). It has been noted, through data from the G-SAT and the FGs, that CSOs operating in more stable areas within Syria are more likely to be gender-inclusive, have more appropriate policies to address bullying and harassment and are more advanced in relation to having adequate internal policies and regulations. Areas in Syria affected by regime bombardment and shelling are less likely to have set internal policies and regulations.

This observation, however, applies not only to work inside Syria, but also extends to neighbouring refugee hosting countries. It is safe to assume that the Turkish context is the main one to allow Syrian CSOs to grow, develop and have future visions for their work beyond the crisis. Turkey allows Syrian CSOs to be registered, and to have internal regulations and policies. In addition to that, CSOs in Turkey have more liberty in relation to the type of activities they could potentially do. CSOs work in Turkey is not limited to humanitarian or relief work, unlike other Syrian CSOs operating in other countries and areas. This presents an opportunity for many interested in gender justice to work with and through developing these already existing CSOs, albeit with caution. Due to this freedom and liberty to choose lines of work other than humanitarian and aid relief<sup>31</sup>, CSOs in Turkey have also to a great degree become too responsive and reliant on donor strategies to shape their work. When designing activities, many of the Turkey-based CSOs refer to donor funding priorities rather than the actual needs on the ground.

In Jordan, on the other hand, work is very much affected by the restrictions placed on Syrians in the country. These restrictions include (1) not allowing Syrian CSOs to register, operate or organise, and (2) general restrictions on Syrians right to work and move in the country. In addition to that, the adverse economic conditions for Syrian refugees make the need for aid and humanitarian relief more urgent. In Lebanon, similarly, due to the adverse conditions experienced by Syrian refugees in the country, a great share of the work being carried out focuses on livelihoods and

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31 In this report, we consider humanitarian work to include as access to food, water, shelter, medical assistance, physical and psychological wellbeing and dignity. This is the definition adopted by the European Commission: <https://bit.ly/2Dmjslo>.

humanitarian protection and relief. Some Syrian-led education and development initiatives exist in the country; however, their work is restricted by the government and by the adverse living conditions in the country. It has been reported that child labour is common among the refugee population in Lebanon (Halldorsson, 2017). In addition to livelihood and relief focused CSOs activity in Lebanon, smaller initiatives that deal with the differential needs of women and address gender justice do exist, however, their operations are also affected by the situation in the country and the continuously changing needs of the Syrian population. In addition to security, women's involvement in CSOs is greatly dependent on the social context in the areas of their operation and the cultural values prevalent in these areas.

#### 4.4 Social Context

The importance of taking context into consideration in relation to gender programming cannot be emphasised enough, as they could provide opportunities for developing a gender-sensitive discourse within Syrian CSOs. Therefore, it is always important to take the nuances of the local areas, where Syrian CSOs operate. In addition to the differential security contexts, there are also different social contexts in which Syrian CSOs operate, and some of these contexts allow for more radical changes in relation to gender justice to emerge and to increasing women's involvement in CSOs. Opportunities provided through the social contexts are different, and each of the refugee hosting countries, as well as the different conditions of areas inside Syria, has their own particularities. In Turkey, for instance, despite the opportunities provided for CSOs to develop their own internal procedures, there are also many limitations related to women's involvement in Syrian CSOs. Syrian refugees in Turkey often express feelings on instability and threat due to perceived hostility on behalf of the hosting communities (CTDC, 2015). Such perceived threats and instability often leave a grave impact on women, and their ability to become involved in Syrian CSOs. This impact is reflected in family's desire to restrict women's movement, mobility and access to work. These social restrictions placed on women are often justified through 'fear for their safety'<sup>32</sup>.

In Jordan, in addition to legal restrictions on Syrian refugees, the lack of education and employment opportunities also influence women's involvement in CSOs (Dupire, 2018, Dear, 2018, UNICEF USA, 2017). The struggle for survival on a daily basis for the Syrian refugee population impedes CSOs work in general, and also influences social attitudes towards women. For instance, many families in Jordan find themselves in situations, where marriage is the only option for the

survival of their daughters and families. Cultural values related to 'honour' and restrictions over women's movement are exacerbated by local social and political contexts, experienced by Syrian refugee populations. In Lebanon, on the other hand, it has been noted, that girls are more likely to access schools in comparison to boys, and thus are more likely to become involved in Syrian CSOs for two reasons (1) boys are encouraged to drop out of schools and pursue income generating activities to help their families, and (2) relatively freedom of movement is not as restricted in Lebanon as it is in Jordan, due to the existence of many Lebanese CSOs that focus on gender issues. As women are perceived as less threatening by hosting communities in refugee contexts (Nasser-Eddin, 2014), they are more likely to pursue employment and join CSOs in comparison to men in the same countries.

Social contexts also vary across the different areas in Syria, depending on who holds control over the area and the demographic background of its population. CSOs in Damascus, al-Suwayda and DSA areas are more likely to have women involved in their work. These areas have been historically considered more open to women's involvement in the public sphere and employment. Other areas, on the other hand, have presented more conservative social attitudes towards women's involvement in CSOs. FGs have demonstrated that the type of work deemed as appropriate for women is very likely to be affected by societal values relevant to those areas, even before the 2011 uprising. It is important to note, though, that these views and values have often been challenged by women pushing for and advancing their agendas, in order to become more involved in CSOs.

In the more conservative areas, women often work and organise at the grassroots level, and outside of the realms of CSOs. These women often go unnoticed and unheard of, but the impact of their work on the ground in relation to gender justice and equality is insurmountable. One interviewee stated: 'there is no funding for SRHR (sexual and reproductive health rights), but women on a daily basis do this type of work as part of their ordinary lives, through providing support and advice to each other and through increasing awareness on the local level <sup>33</sup>.' Whereas social contexts and societal values sometimes present challenges to women's involvement in Syrian CSOs, they also open the door and the conversation for more radical alternatives to gender justice in the country. Syrian women have played a massive role within Syrian civil society, not necessarily within CSOs themselves, but also through their grassroots contribution to building alternative support systems in different local areas in the country. This role must not be overshadowed and ignored, despite it being unofficial, it has been vital for the lives of many Syrians on the ground.

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has lighted the major challenges that hinder women's involvement in Syrian civil society and the challenges that also face women led organisations. These challenges were explored as internal and external factors, and many of these challenges highlighted failures in relation to gender work within Syrian projects. In addition to that, research has revealed grave inequalities between men and women's access to CSOs, both as beneficiaries and as workers. Both Syrian CSOs themselves and international stakeholders, including INGOs and funding bodies, can address many of these inequalities, through simple and sustainable measures. Each analysis section has provided major conclusions and findings regarding the state of affairs in relation to women within CSOs. This section provides practical recommendations for both Syrian CSOs and international stakeholders based on the research results.

### Recommendations to Syrian Civil Society Organisations:

- 1. Gender-Sensitivity Trainings:** Syrian CSOs are encouraged to prioritise gender-sensitivity trainings for their staff members and volunteers in order to make their working environments more inclusive for women and other marginalised groups. Such trainings may include gender mainstreaming from a feminist perspective, feminist governance trainings, and organisational development trainings from a feminist perspective, to mention a few. It is recommended that such trainings are made obligatory and part of individual employees inductions, or that at least toolkits and guides must be made available to members.
- 2. Internal Policies and Regulations:** CSOs are encouraged to have internal policies and regulations, such as Human Resources and bylaws, which take the differential needs of women into consideration. In addition to that, policies that address harassment and bullying and formal complaints mechanisms must be in place for safeguarding and to make the working environment more friendly to women and other marginalised groups. These policies must also include provisions that accommodate women's specific needs.
- 3. Internal Measures:** CSOs are encouraged to create internal measures and mechanisms in order to ensure gender-sensitivity in their work. To do so, it is recommended that organisations create gender committees responsible for monitoring the individual organisation's sensitivity to

gender. These committees may carry out internal assessments and provide recommendations to their colleagues.

4. **Operational Funds:** CSOs are encouraged to regularly assess ways through which operational funds support can be acquired. Lack of operational funds is often a major obstacle to CSOs ability to accommodate for the needs of women including maternity leaves and childcare. Pursuing operational funds is as important as pursuing funding for activities, and securing it would directly improve the working conditions for women.
5. **Organisational Development:** CSOs are encouraged to invest in their organisational development, in order to avoid inequalities that could emerge through their activities. Gender-sensitive organisational development work potentially makes the working environment safer, more inclusive and sensitive towards the needs of women. This could be done through feminist governance trainings and mentoring.
6. **Gender Sensitive Budgeting:** CSOs are encouraged to take gender into consideration, when budgeting for projects. Gender-sensitive budgets include provisions related to maternity leaves, child support, breastfeeding breaks, etc.
7. **Women Leadership:** CSOs are encouraged to ensure that women are included in leadership and decision-making positions within their organisations. This is not only important for gender representation, but also important because women enrich operations with different perspectives due to their experiences. In addition to that, it is highly encouraged that women lead work related to gender, bearing in mind the importance of previous experience in feminist organising.

## **Recommendations to International Stakeholders:**

1. **Scope of Involvement:** International stakeholders, including funders and INGOs, are encouraged to refrain from attempts to become involved in feminist discourse in countries of interest. Consultants with Arabic-speaking backgrounds must lead work on gender within Syrian CSOs and across the region, and funders' role must be limited to providing support and funding, rather than engaging in local conversations and discourses around gender. If gender justice is the goal behind such funding, the scope of involvement should be limited to the areas where financial, material and some technical support is needed to attain gender justice, and should not extend to engagement in feminist discourse.
2. **Feminist Governance:** International stakeholders are encouraged to adopt the ethics of feminist governance in relation to their conduct and operations in the areas they are funding. In other words, funding mechanisms need to start adopting good governance tools in the way

they make decisions in relation to their activities, selection of grantees, budgetary allocations, and their interventions in general. Research has identified several bad governance practices conducted on behalf of international stakeholders and their representatives, which directly influence women's involvement in Syrian CSOs.

3. **Context-Specificity:** International stakeholders, including funders and INGOs, are encouraged to resort to context specific consultants and experts, rather than rely on international experts foreign to the context. Work on gender in Arabic language must be supported in order to ensure organic social change.
4. **Flexible Programming:** International stakeholders, including funders and INGOs, are encouraged to adopt a flexible approach to programs and projects, in order to accommodate for the rapidly changing needs within some communities. This flexible programming must be applied to budgets, activities and results, so that it is more adaptable to the changing needs on the ground.
5. **Local Strategies:** International stakeholders, including funders and INGOs, are encouraged to inform their programming through locally developed working strategies, rather than Syria-wide gender strategies. This is particularly important due to the varying needs and conditions of operations Syrian CSOs experience based on their locations. Local strategies as such should also be appropriated to labour laws and legislation in the specific contexts. With the massive variations in relation to the geographical location and the laws regulating CSO activities, it is not suitable to address legal reform through this research, as each area would require different strategies.
6. **Fund Women:** International stakeholders are encouraged to take advantage of the many opportunities enabled through specific social contexts, whether inside Syria or in neighbouring countries, that would allow for more gender-focused work to take place. These opportunities if utilised can pave the way for a locally-led gender discourse to develop and emerge. However, the leaders of such initiatives must be women, with experience in feminist organising.
7. **More Research:** International stakeholders, including funders and INGOs, are encouraged to fund and support locally and regionally led research into gender and sexual justice. These, if made available in Arabic, have the potential to enrich the discourse around gender and sexuality in Arabic and to raise awareness around the importance of women's inclusion in CSOs.





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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Gender-sensitivity Assessment Tool for CSOs and NGOs

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The tool was conducted as an online form through KoboCollect Platform, and is accessible for review through the following link.

<https://ee.humanitarianresponse.info/preview/::XwoCKZNx>

Questions listed below provide an overview of the most important sections of the tool, complete set of questions and pre-set answer options are available in original Arabic through the link above.

- Date and place of interview:
- Names and positions of respondent(s):
- General information:
  - Organization name (in original language - in English - abbreviated name)
  - Chief of board:
  - Executive director
  - Contact information (website, Facebook page, Twitter page, organization email, phone number, contact name, contact person's email address)
  - Organization logo
  - Locations (head office address - work areas - offices outside the country - countries where the organization operates)
- Structure:
  - Date and place of establishment of CSO:
  - Is the organization officially registered? (Yes/ No)
  - Country or region where the organization is registered
  - Organization's start date
  - Number of members (select one out of the predefined ranges and then enter the number accurately)
  - Number of female members (select one out of the predefined ranges and then enter the number accurately)
  - Is there a quota for the number of women in the organization? (Yes /No)
  - Number of members of the Board of Directors (select a range of predefined areas and then enter the number accurately)
  - Number of women in the Board of directors (select one out of the predefined ranges and then accurately enter the number)
  - Departments and sub-departments in the organization (multiple choice)

- Work areas and specialization: Main work areas are chosen through a predetermined menu. Subdomains are later selected via a predetermined dropdown menu.
- Organization's target group (multiple choice from the following options: not tailored to a specific group / women / men / youths 24-18 / children 18 – 0/ religious groups / ethnic group / detainees / widows / people with special needs / refugees / IDPs / Hostages / Host Communities / Government / Other Civil Society Organizations / Other / Do not Know / No Answer)
- Internal policies and procedures:
  - What are the three main sources of funding for the organization?
  - Do you have a salary scale (yes / no)? is it applied?
  - Are there financial policies & procedures (yes / no)?

**For the following questions, the most suitable and appropriate option should be selected and then explained with an open-ended answer**

- Does the organization have HR policies?
  1. There are no HR and personnel affairs policies
  2. There are some standard models, especially with regard to salaries and contracts, but are not comprehensive (they do not include all aspects related to human resources)
  3. There are human resource policies, but they are not fully implemented and are not known to all employees
  4. There is a set of HR policies that are known and applied by staff and are always updated
- Does the organization have policies on bullying, harassment and accountability?
  1. There are no written policies or procedures in this regard
  2. implicitly noted within HR policy or values and are not reviewed or applied
  3. Exist explicitly within HR policies but not known to all and not fully implemented
  4. There is a written and clear policy regarding bullying and harassment and is known to all and applied
    - Please clarify verification methods and accountability procedures
- Does the organization have within its policies a framework for recruitment, contract termination and promotions?
  1. There is no written framework, the dismissal, recruitment and promotion processes are done as needed
  2. There is a standard model within HR policies, but is often overlooked
  3. The framework is explicitly included within HR policies but is not known to all and not fully implemented
  4. There is a clear framework and procedures and are always applied and documented
- How is the recruitment process carried out in the organization?

1. There are no special procedures for recruitment, but the process is done as needed
  2. Interviews are conducted for recruitment, but without following specific procedures
  3. There are special procedures for recruitment including interviews and probation periods, but sometimes are overlooked
  4. All recruitment processes are conducted according to a specific procedure, known to all and the entire process is documented
- Is gender equality adhered to when applying the salary scale?
    1. There is a salary scale that includes salaries of both men and women according to each position
    2. There is a salary scale based on employee position and experience regardless of gender
    3. There is a disparity between the salaries of women and men who hold the same positions
      - Please explain the reasons behind any disparity
  - Internal complaints system:
    1. There is no complaint system within the organization
    2. There are no written policies or procedures put in place, but there are some fairly known informal mechanisms to resolve complaints
    3. There are general complaint procedures within the organization, but are not known to all and not fully applied
    4. There is a clear procedure for the complaint process within the organization and it is known to all and followed by the majority of staff
  - internal Feedback:
    1. There is no adopted feedback system
    2. There are no written policies or procedures, but there are some fairly known informal mechanisms
    3. There are general procedures regarding the feedback process, but are not known to all and not fully applied
    4. There are clear feedback procedures known to all and followed by the majority of staff
  - What positions do women hold in the organization? (Open-ended question)
  - Projects and external outlook:
    - Needs assessment and project design:
      1. Needs assessment is only carried out when requested by donors and they are rarely used for project design and development
      2. Needs assessment and project design are only carried out by the organization in accordance with funding
      3. The organization only carries out limited needs assessments or within a specific type of pro-

ject. Such data may be used to develop and design projects

4. The organization adopts project concepts and develops them based on continuous periodic assessments of needs
- Participatory approach to project design and implementation:
    1. The organization does not involve beneficiaries and stakeholders in project development and implementation
    2. Beneficiaries and stakeholders are involved in the implementation of some projects according to the nature of the project
    3. Beneficiaries and stakeholders are involved in project design and implementation but on a small scale
    4. The organization follows a participatory approach with regards to beneficiaries and stakeholders' involvement in the development and implementation of its projects
  - Selection of beneficiaries:
    1. Beneficiaries are selected randomly and based on reachability
    2. Beneficiaries are selected based on the project's nature and donor requirements
    3. Beneficiaries are selected according to pre-set criteria, which usually include a women's quota
    4. Beneficiaries are selected according to project objectives, taking into account diversity and not necessarily depending on quantitative quotas
  - Monitoring and evaluation:
    1. Monitoring & evaluation of projects are carried out only at the request of the donor
    2. There is an M&E department in the organization, but is a mere formality and does not oversee all projects
    3. There is an M&E department that has specific written procedures, but are often overlooked
    4. The M&E process of all projects is carried out according to pre-determined methodologies and plans that are consistent with the organization's policies.
  - External complaints system:
    1. There is no adopted system for complaints lodged by beneficiaries
    2. There are no written policies or procedures, however complaints lodged by beneficiaries are directly followed-up on or indirectly through social media
    3. There are general procedures regarding beneficiaries' complaints in the assessment process, but are not known to all and not fully implemented
    4. There are clear procedures for the complaint processes, which are known to all members of the organization and beneficiaries are informed of and are frequently updated on.

- External Feedback:

1. There is no adopted system for feedback given by beneficiaries
2. There are no written policies or procedures, but the views and reactions of beneficiaries are followed-up on directly or indirectly through social media
3. There are general feedback procedures within the assessment process, but are not known to all and are not fully-applied
4. There are clear procedures with regards to feedback that are known to all the organization's members and beneficiaries are informed of and are updated on frequently.

- Media and outreach policies:

1. There are no media and outreach policies
2. Beneficiaries are informed only of the projects aimed towards them
3. Advertising and promotion of projects are carried out randomly on the organization's social media pages
4. There is a team specialized in external communication that oversees media and promotion operations according to written policies that are constantly developed

- Additional information supplied by the organization:

- Researcher's notes:



## Appendix II: Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

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Date of FGD:

Number of participants (male and female)

Introduction:

The aim of this session is to explore your opinions regarding the status of women and gender equality at the organization. Personal information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and discretion. This data will only be shared with a small group of researchers and will never be made public. Attendance of the 60-minute session is optional.

### Notes for the facilitator and minute taker:

The aim of this session is to survey the opinions of various staff members within the organization with regards to its women and gender policies. It is crucial to gauge the opinions of all participants. The questions listed in the below table are related to several key aspects of the topic at hand. It is also important that the topic is well covered by follow-up questions or examples when needed in order to foster discussion among participants. In questions 1, 3, 5 and 6, it is paramount that a common grasp of the adopted terminology be established. In this case, it is recommended to ask participants about their understanding of a certain term, and then proceed to clarify the intended context as follows:

- Gender: A set of roles, characteristics and attributes assigned by society to men and women, which they're expected to conform with lest they be considered not adhering to the roles attributed to them. Gender is a role or performance, a set of practices or behaviors.
- Gender equality: A type of equality that is not only based on quantitative but qualitative representation of men and women in the organization. For example, an equal number of males and females in the workplace does not necessarily signify adherence to gender equality, since the division of roles in itself can constitute a gender-based discrimination.
- Bullying: A type of behavior that seeks to terrorize or hurt another person, either physically or emotionally. This behavior is often characterized by repeated verbal, physical or implied threats, and is carried out by people abusing their power (such as physical strength, popularity, knowledge, position, etc.) to control those who are inferior in order to inflict harm. Bullying can take on different forms including, but not limited to, harassment, threatening, blackmailing, spreading rumors, defamation, physical injury or damaging property.
- Harassment: An uninvited or unwelcome psychological, sexual, verbal or physical conduct. It includes a set of actions ranging from minor violations to serious abuses that might include the uttering of various derogatory innuendos.

Name of minute taker		Date (Day/month/year)	
Name of facilitator		Region	
Topic:	Main ideas	Standout quotes	Additional remarks:
1- To what extent do you feel there is equality between the sexes? How is it manifested?			
2- Do you think there are internal policies and regulations that protect the rights of everyone? How clear are these policies, if any?			
3- Are there procedures in place that deal with cases of harassment or gender discrimination in the workplace?			
4- Can you provide examples of such cases (negative or positive)?			
5- Do you think there are obstacles, internal or external, that stand in the way of reaching total gender equality in the workplace?			
6- In your opinion, to what extent does the organization adhere to the principles of gender equality when selecting beneficiaries?			
7- What are your suggestions for improving work environment in terms of gender equality?			
8- Do you wish to add anything else?			

Reviewed by:

## Participants list

Number	Full Name	Did you consent to attending the session	Gender	Age	Position	Marital status
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						

### Contextual information necessary for the intensive discussion session

- The security situation in the region during the intensive discussion session:
- Logistics :
- Participants' interactions:
- Additional Notes:
- Photos or sound recordings when available (subject to the consent of the participants):

## Appendix III: Interviews

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Number	Age	Gender	Background	Interview Date
1	32	Man	Local human Rights Practitioner	20/10/2018
2	46	Woman	International human rights practitioner	24/10/2018
3	45	Man	Local human rights practitioner	19/12/2018
4	38	Woman	Local feminist activist	12/01/2019
5	25	Woman	Psychosocial support case worker	30/10/2018
6	27	Woman	Gender based violence local expert	15/11/2018
7	39	Woman	Local project manager in aid	25/10/2018
8	42	Woman	Local project manager	23/11/2018
9	42	Man	Aid organisation worker	30/10/2018
10	48	Man	Finance officer	20/12/2018
11	28	Woman	Local project manager in psychosocial support	28/10/2018
12	49	Man	CEO of a human rights organisation	16/11/2018
13	31	Woman	Administrative assistant	5/1/2019
14	44	Woman	Founder of a woman's organisation	23/12/2018
15	29	Woman	Local project manager	20/12/2018
16	32	Woman	Feminist activist	22/12/2018
17	36	Woman	Women charity worker	13/1/2019
18	43	Woman	Local women organisation	12/1/2019
19	50	Man	Local project manager	14/1/2019
20	32	Woman	Women's organisation manager	15/1/2019





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Civil Society Research  
and Development

Published by: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development  
Keithstraße 10, 10787 Berlin

Not for sale

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Feb 2019