

SYRIA IN TRANSITION: WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, CIVIC SPACE, AND GENDER JUSTICE

July 2026



Executive Summary

This brief addresses the multilayered challenges and systemic barriers faced by Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and women more broadly across Syria, in the aftermath of fourteen years of conflict, the fall of the Assad regime, and under the current government.

This brief reflects findings from Femena's field research in Syria in June 2025 and consultations with WHRDs, representatives of women-led initiatives, civil society organizations, and victims' associations. More consultations were conducted online in the last quarter of 2025 and the first quarter of 2026 with Syrian WHRDs residing across the country.

The brief reflects the myriad difficulties and hardships afflicting Syrian society following the war and its inevitable consequences, such as forced displacement and economic collapse. It highlights the disparate impact of these issues on women – for example, the fact that high unemployment and increased poverty rates heighten women and girls' vulnerability to different forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence or forced and early marriage. The crisis affecting the healthcare and public education systems has created significant barriers to access, with a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

The WHRDs interviewed reported on intensified societal fragmentation and divisions across various lines, as well as high rates of targeted sectarian attacks and abductions. Amidst these difficult circumstances, WHRDs and their initiatives often serve as frontline responders in their local communities, distributing aid and protection services through informal support networks and advocating for needs and priorities. Grassroots WHRDs and initiatives operating in Syria throughout the war expressed frustration and a pervasive sense of disregard for being excluded by the government and international stakeholders, and for their expertise being overlooked in aid, recovery, and justice processes. Despite having stayed in Syria and surviving 14 years of conflict, their efforts are often sidelined in favor of civil society actors returning from the diaspora.

WHRDs spoke about the impacts of long-standing economic hardship and job insecurity, rising living costs, and heightened rates of targeted sectarian violence against women, alongside deepening social divides and the exclusion of local WHRDs. Moreover, they expressed concerns over heightened intercommunal tensions and technology-facilitated harassment of WHRDs, which have compounded consequences for vulnerable women and those from minority backgrounds. Moreover, humanitarian aid remains politicized, and socioeconomic hardships continue to push women and girls out of education and into unstable work.

Moreover, newly established justice and accountability mechanisms lack clear mandates, and victims' associations and grassroots organizations complain of inadequate consultation in their design. The commissions are generally viewed as more symbolic than capable of delivering truth and justice effectively. Furthermore, a mental health crisis persists, and shrinking civic spaces and burnout amongst WHRDs and civil society actors are rampant.

Across all regions consulted, Syrian WHRDs emerged not only as rights advocates but also as frontline responders delivering life-affirming services to their communities in a time of crisis and transition. Their initiatives and organizations provide humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, protection services, documentation of violations, mediation, and community leadership, often filling gaps left by weakened state institutions and overstretched humanitarian actors. Despite their critical role, they remain underfunded, excluded from decision-making processes, and insufficiently recognized by national and international stakeholders.

All recommendations reflect the lived realities, demands, and priorities of Syrian WHRDs and initiatives/organizations consulted by Femena.

Methodology

In late June 2025, Femena conducted a field research visit to Syria to interview WHRDs, leaders of women-led initiatives, civil society organizations with gender programs, and victims' associations. The organizations and initiatives provide holistic support services to women, including protection, political participation, and economic empowerment, as well as efforts related to justice and accountability, advocacy, and community engagement.

In total, Femena's researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 23 women human rights defenders working in the Northwest (Idlib and rural north Aleppo), Latakia in the coastal region (both city and countryside), Jaramana in the Damascus governorate, Suweida governorate in the Southwest, Kurdish-majority Northeast, as well as a representative from a victims' association for families of the forcibly disappeared. Some of the WHRDs worked for organizations that operated across different areas of Syria. The participants interviewed included women from Arab Sunni, Christian, Druze, Alawite, and Kurdish backgrounds, as well as diverse political affiliations. Their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties. For security reasons, the names/identities of the WHRDs interviewed are not disclosed in this report.

The consultations explored socioeconomic, political, legal, and security challenges affecting WHRDs and women more broadly. The participants provided insights into structural barriers and inequalities, as well as societal dynamics, with a particular focus on how these factors affected women and civil society.

This brief analyzes and synthesizes information received from these consultations and discussions, supplementing it with secondary sources and desk-based research to illustrate patterns that cut across communitarian boundaries and also reflect regional dynamics. The brief uses lived experiences and survivor-centered approaches to ensure that the findings and recommendations reflect the emergent priorities and demands of women and women-led organizations in Syria.

Findings: Overarching Patterns and Trends

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria entered a period of political transition marked by the emergence of new governing authorities, shifting security arrangements, and ongoing territorial fragmentation. While the transition has created new opportunities for civic engagement in some areas, it has also entailed renewed violence, contested governance structures, and uncertainty regarding the future of justice, accountability, and inclusive political participation.

Economic Decline and Its Gendered Impacts

All WHRDs who took part in this consultation reported on the dire economic situation in Syria, characterized by widespread unemployment that has plunged much of society into poverty, but with disproportionate impacts on women and other structurally excluded communities. Syria's job market is in deep crisis, and the scarcity of regular employment opportunities has forced much of the population into informal and precarious work. Such fragile conditions exacerbate financial distress, as families become dependent on insecure jobs, making it difficult to save and invest, and subsequently trapping them in poverty. University education brings limited benefits in this climate of crisis, and many skilled workers emigrate, contributing to brain drain and further undermining the economy and destabilizing communities.

The deeply entrenched and systemic inequalities of Syria's patriarchal society, which pre-existed the conflict, continue to take a heavy toll on women. Gender-discriminatory personal status laws relating to property ownership and inheritance, coupled with sexist traditions that favor men and boys, have created systemic barriers to women's access and control over assets, heavily affecting women-headed households and increasing their vulnerability to poverty and homelessness. The loss of male family members to conflict and enforced disappearance in Syria has compounded the issue and made it more pervasive. This issue is a significant obstacle for women trying to obtain certificates that would allow them to remarry or to claim the property of a deceased or disappeared husband. Despite the fall of the regime in December 2024, women continue to face challenges in reclaiming housing and land and continue to confront numerous practical, bureaucratic, and legal barriers while attempting to do so.

Deteriorating economic conditions have led to an increase in different forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and child labor. Even when women head households and are the primary breadwinners of their families, Syria's prevailing patriarchal norms continue to impact them and shape society's expectations of them, restricting their choice of work and mobility. Traditionally, like women across the world, Syrian women carry the brunt of domestic and emotional labor, which includes raising children and attending to elderly relatives. In addition to shouldering the burden of the care economy, Syrian women are pursuing precarious income-generating roles, with few prospects of upward mobility.

Breakdown of Healthcare and Widening Exclusion

Fourteen years of conflict took its toll on Syria's healthcare sector, and the system continues to deteriorate, with rural and conflict-affected areas particularly impacted. More than a third of health facilities are operating well below normal capacity due to physical damage to buildings, inadequate staffing, and constant medical shortages. The collapse of healthcare services has made it especially difficult for women trying to access maternal reproductive services, with pregnant women often having to travel long distances to receive care, where they are frequently turned away because hospitals are so strained. It has also led to a shortage of mental health and psychosocial support, which affects many people, given the high rates of psychological distress due to prolonged conflict and violations. This sense of psychosocial malaise is felt most strongly by women and youth, especially those experiencing intersecting forms of exclusion based on socioeconomic status, geography, or IDP status. To help fill the gaps and address the dire mental health needs, WHRDs and women-led grassroots initiatives often step in to provide psychosocial support services as well as create safe spaces and solidarity networks for women and girls.

Deepening Social Divides and Marginalization of WHRDs

Protracted conflict in Syria has further entrenched preexisting divides between urban and rural areas. It has also created new divisions among IDPs and host communities and heightened societal divisions among sectarian and ethnic groups and around differences in religious practice and observance. WHRDs who remained in Syria during the conflict and provided services to communities often feel overlooked by national and international stakeholders who tend to favor local elites, Syrian returnees from the diaspora, and newcomers from Idlib, perceiving them as better-skilled. Grassroots civil society experts and WHRDs who remained in Syria express deep discouragement at the dismissal of their capacities and expertise. Furthermore, some WHRDs reported that they refrain from discussing women's issues and women's participation out of fear of reprisals from authoritarian factions and extremist armed groups.

Decline in Public Education and Risks for Girls

As with any prolonged conflict, the war in Syria has also adversely impacted the education system, with consequent underfunding, personnel shortages, and increased dropout rates from students that invariably result from situations of forced displacement, economic precarity, and general insecurity. Even in Damascus, schools are overstretched, suffering from overcrowded classrooms and damaged infrastructure. Forcibly displaced children are among the most affected, and many such children have been forced to abandon their education permanently. Girls and young women are at higher risk of being removed from schools and universities, subsequently affecting their prospects for employment and independence, and increasing their vulnerability to early marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. Beyond these immediate effects, denying girls the opportunity to learn has long-term consequences for their families, communities, and future generations.

Pushback on Women's Rights

WHRDs working in all regions across Syria report increasing resistance to women's rights, frequently echoed in the public statements by some government officials regarding women's roles and expectations. While there have been no official decrees barring women from employment or imposing a dress code, WHRDs note that conservative and religious attitudes are being amplified by the government's rhetoric and overall posture. WHRDs state that some women previously active in public life who have returned to Syria from neighboring countries report pressure from male relatives to stop working, stay at home, and adopt traditional roles. One outcome of Syria's 14-year conflict was the engagement of some women in public life through their humanitarian work and other forms of activism. However, civil society groups worry and warn that the current climate threatens to marginalize feminist voices and reverse the advances made by women since the 2011 uprising.

WHRDs also described growing concerns about sectarian narratives that stigmatize entire communities and reinforce social divisions. Narratives portraying certain minority groups as collectively responsible for past abuses, political instability, or opposition to the transition contribute to discrimination, online hate speech, and heightened insecurity. Such dynamics continue to undermine social cohesion and increase risks for women and human rights defenders from minority backgrounds, as well as hinder prospects for an inclusive and sustainable transition.

Women who speak publicly—especially WHRDs, journalists, or NGO staff—are often subjected to online smear campaigns, harassment, and non-consensual circulation of images and videos, as well as blackmail and threats of violence and death. And due to deeply embedded patriarchal norms, a single rumor or fabricated photo can severely damage a woman's reputation, trigger family restrictions, and lead to physical violence and even death. Despite the severe impacts, there are no effective legal frameworks that criminalize cyber-violence or provide safe avenues for redress. WHRDs and service providers note that limited digital literacy, weak data protection practices among aid agencies, and the dependence on smartphones and messaging apps to access aid and employment heighten these vulnerabilities.

Enforced Disappearance, Justice, and Accountability:

The deposed Assad regime, known for its abysmal human rights record, perpetrated widespread and systemic enforced disappearances, with an estimated over one hundred thousand cases of missing persons, most of whom are presumed to have died in detention. The families of the forcibly disappeared have dealt with years of uncertainty about their loved ones. Due to the lack of documentation, death certificates, or the remains of those who disappeared, many families are unable to grieve or find proper closure. Women relatives of the forcibly disappeared often bear the responsibility of providing for their families, burdened by the emotional trauma of years of advocating for the release of disappeared family members, and sometimes falling into poverty and debt because of bribes required to obtain information from government officials. The ongoing psychological stressors affect the family and the broader community, as trauma is passed on to children and impacts are perpetuated across generations.

Families of the disappeared state that the newly established commissions dedicated to the issue of missing persons and transitional justice lack clear mandates and are unable to guarantee accountability for violations or the return of victims' remains. The transitional authorities currently lack the capacity to exhume and investigate mass graves with the necessary forensic expertise, which risks losing evidence and causing more emotional distress for families. Members of victims' families expressed frustration at the government's inadequate consultation in the design of these mechanisms. Most of those responsible for the crimes enjoy impunity, and victims and their families view the created mechanisms as symbolic and largely ineffective in delivering truth and justice. Moreover, the crime of enforced disappearance continues in Syria under the new government, conducted by security forces and armed factions often aligned with the government. Ongoing impunity for human rights violations is further eroding trust in institutions and exacerbating community-wide trauma. WHRDS emphasized that without a comprehensive and survivor-centric justice and accountability process holding all perpetrators accountable for past and ongoing crimes, there cannot be durable peace, security, and democratic governance in Syria.



Grassroots Civil Society Challenges

Grassroots civil society groups, and women-led initiatives in particular, are severely underfunded, and their staff and operations are overstretched due to increased community needs and demands. The general shortage of funding, particularly the decline in long-term, flexible financing, worsens existing disparities and inequalities, including those affecting women. Protection for women and vulnerable minorities, through anti-violence laws, safeguards against sectarian targeting, as well as equitable access to essential response services, remains weak. Moreover, many civil society organizations that were once based across Syria have moved to Damascus since the fall of the previous regime, which has created an additional shortage of services in smaller cities and rural areas across the country.

Regional Dynamics and Trends:

Latakia (City and Countryside)

Economic and Socio-Political Challenges

Latakia city and the countryside have faced long-running economic issues stemming from disruptions to the agricultural sector due to prolonged conflict, forced displacement, and migration. Women and youth face significant barriers to accessing job opportunities in both the public and private sectors. Urban Latakia offers slightly more prospects but holds fierce competition and formidable gatekeeping by established actors. The increase in rent, fuel, and the general cost of living is exacerbating the current economic crisis, particularly in Latakia city. As a result, vulnerable communities (women, widows, displaced populations) are pushed into debt or precarious, informal work. Economic scarcity fuels tension and occasional conflict between communities, especially between urban and rural communities, migrant and host communities, and between those who stayed and those returning or perceived as “outsiders.”



Gaps in Social and Psychological Services

Service centers that provide psychological support and safe spaces for women and children are scarce in many rural areas, so widespread mental health and psychosocial issues often remain unaddressed. Facilities are sometimes completely absent or suspended due to instability, access challenges, and security concerns, especially for displaced populations and survivors of violence. Frequent disruptions happen with humanitarian operations and mobile outreach teams, which subsequently affect critical support needed for mental health stressors compounded by ongoing violence. Hope for future progress is hindered by both structural factors (poverty, exclusion, repression) and pervasive psychological exhaustion among activists, caregivers, and civil society.

Inaccessible Education

Schooling is becoming increasingly inaccessible due to rising costs, staff shortages, and transportation issues, leading to a surge in dropout rates across schools and universities. Ongoing security issues, closed roads, and recently intensified violence have further lowered attendance rates and necessitated that some schools be turned into shelters. Fear of gendered and sectarian violence has led families, particularly rural Alawites, to pull their daughters out of schools and universities. It has resulted in high levels of absenteeism among girls and young women in that region. Educators and NGOs have also criticized the government's rapid changes to the school curricula, which were implemented without adequate professional consultation and, in some ways, have increased the politicization of school content.

Gender Norms, Violence Against Women, and Social Fragmentation

Traditional gendered norms remain strong, and women and girls report community pressure and surveillance, particularly in rural and religiously mixed settings, where women are often held back from participating in public life and taking on leadership roles. Given the coastal region massacre that took place in March 2025 and resulted in the killing of approximately 1,400 people, and the continued gendered sectarian violence and abductions, some Alawite women now feel compelled to wear the veil. While the veil is not part of their traditions and customs, they wear it in the hope of protecting themselves from targeted attacks and abductions. The fear of violence shapes daily life—women change how they dress, where they go, and whether they use public or digital spaces. Women, particularly WHRDs or those visible in public roles, often face in-person and cyber threats such as blackmail, threats, and harassment on social media. WHRDs expressed a profound sense of injustice and a lack of accountability for the systemic violence and discrimination against women in the region.

Community members cite “living in a state of collective trauma,” facing cycles of violence, loss, and pervasive mistrust, which some described as a continued “state of emergency.” There have been increased reports of inter-communal tension, fragmentation, and deepening rural-urban divides, along with an aura of suspicion and blame that erodes social cohesion. While some WHRDs noted that their ability to operate and register was easier under the new government than the previous regime, and that they now feel

some 'breathing space' as civil society organizations and initiatives, many stated that civic space remains tightly controlled, with civil society organizations required to 'fit' new government structures and priorities. Long-established local civil society actors feel that new, government-aligned players are replacing them. Local grassroots actors with years of experience are frequently sidelined and excluded from coordination mechanisms established by the new government, and the expertise of local women is especially overlooked on matters concerning aid, recovery, and justice processes.

Justice, Law, and Exclusion

Avenues of justice for victims and families of the March 2025 coastal massacre, which overwhelmingly affected Alawite civilians, as well as for other victims of sectarian and gender-based discrimination, violence, and abduction, remain very limited. Those seeking legal recourse are often ignored or actively discouraged by government officials. WHRDs stated that gender-based violence and cases of abuse, abduction, and enforced disappearance of women are rarely investigated or redressed. The legal system is widely perceived as inadequate and as an instrument of political exclusion rather than a means of protection. Most victims and their families prefer not to report incidents due to threats and blackmail, fear of possible reprisals, or a lack of confidence in accountability mechanisms. Local grassroots responders emphasize that new laws and policies are often developed without meaningful consultation, resulting in confusion and chaos.

Barriers to Empowerment and Public Life

The gatekeeping between urban/rural communities means that even in Latakia city, newcomers (especially displaced women) struggle to access aid, employment, or decision-making. Generational divides are pronounced—many younger women and girls have known only crisis and disruption, which has limited their confidence and opportunities for leadership. Civil society's prior experience and expertise are dismissed, especially by international donors and new local players, despite years of on-the-ground community service and advocacy. Women's groups and activists report that their input is requested only superficially and rarely reflected in policy or practice ("tokenism, not transformation").



Shrinking Space and Burnout in Civil Society

Due to the global funding crisis, Syrian civil society initiatives and organizations, particularly those led by women, face a dwindling supply of sustainable, flexible financing. When funding is allocated, it is often short-term and project-based, with burdensome reporting requirements, and projects are frequently shaped by donors rather than developed through a bottom-up approach. Local NGOs and community service providers report feeling burned out and overwhelmed, as they are unable to meet the scale of demand due to rising needs and diminishing funds. WHRDs state that humanitarian and community efforts are primarily short-term, and the prospects for long-term durability and further institutionalization remain low. Moreover, WHRDs stress that the lack of community trust and social solidarity, such as polarization, blame, and speech that “others” specific communities or groups, has worsened since 2011.

Northwest Syria (Idlib and Northern Aleppo)

Socioeconomic collapse, displacement, and daily survival

The northwest region of Syria has hosted repeated waves of forced displacement from different parts of the country for over a decade. The 2023 earthquakes that heavily affected the northwest of Syria, destroying houses and livelihoods, exacerbated poverty and the already dire displacement crisis. Since the end of 2024, many IDPs have returned from the northwest to their regions of origin in Syria, previously controlled by the Assad regime. However, many IDPs remain, particularly those whose houses were destroyed in their hometowns, and who are financially unable to rebuild or rent. Overcrowded camps and informal settlements are now semi-permanent environments in which families have lived for years, under substandard shelter conditions that provide little privacy and protection from harsh weather and violence. The scarcity of privacy in these spaces makes women and girls more vulnerable to harassment and sexual exploitation. Limited WASH infrastructure increases the burden of unpaid care work, particularly for women and girls, and heightens their protection risks around latrines and water points, especially at night. Moreover, women and girls in camps and informal settlements are more vulnerable to extreme poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

Housing, return dynamics, and stalled reconstruction

Since the fall of the regime over a year ago, displacement patterns have been shifting, with large numbers of people returning from other regions in Syria and neighboring countries to towns and villages in northern rural Aleppo and Idlib, which remain heavily destroyed. WHRDs interviewed describe “return” as often living in a single repaired room inside a bombed-out house or pitching a tent on their own land because reconstruction has barely begun, with debris spread across the urban landscape.

Housing has become one of the sharpest fault lines of vulnerability, especially for woman-headed households. Since the fall of the Assad regime, rents have doubled in rural Aleppo and Idlib, with landlords often demanding six months' rent upfront, a challenge for women relying on sporadic aid or precarious incomes. Reconstruction efforts remain piecemeal, and women are usually forced to choose between overcrowded arrangements with extended family, unsafe, informal shelters, or high levels of indebtedness.

Basic services: infrastructure, health, and education

WHRDs from Idlib described severely destroyed vital infrastructure, with water stations and sewage systems still heavily damaged. Residents often rely on paid water trucking rather than on functioning networks. Electricity from public entities is highly unreliable, leading some families to invest in costly solar systems or to endure chronic power shortages that affect the refrigeration of food and medicine, lighting, and communication.

The health sector underscores the gendered impacts of service shortages. Many NGOs have ended or drastically reduced their operations, resulting in the closure or downsizing of primary health centers that once offered low-cost or free care. Towns often rely on an inadequate small dispensary for standard deliveries, and a catchment area of 50-100 villages is usually not serviced by a nearby, adequately funded maternity or pediatric hospital. Consequently, women in labor or facing obstetric emergencies frequently need to travel 45–60 minutes at night on unsafe roads, sometimes being turned away due to overcrowding or lack of supplies.

Education has also been laboriously disrupted, and there are too few functioning schools relative to the population and the number of people returning. Some buildings are still damaged, and others have been repurposed as shelters, placing particular pressure on girls' education. When families are faced with the choice of which children to send to school, boys are often prioritized, and girls—especially adolescents—are kept home to help with domestic labor, care for younger siblings, or because parents fear harassment and insecurity on the way to school.

Gender-based violence, cyber-violence, and social control

Long-term displacement, financial distress, and inadequate camp conditions have led to an increase in multiple forms of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, child and forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and trafficking, often affecting adolescent girls and widows in particular. With prevailing patriarchal norms, early marriage is usually framed as a way to reduce the financial burden on families or to provide a "safe" shelter solution for girls, as families fear social stigma and ostracization if incidents of sexual violence take place. Still, in reality, early marriage exposes girls to marital rape, domestic violence, and the loss of educational and livelihood opportunities.

Political environment, “red lines,” and civic space

Despite the fall of the regime, women activists in northern rural Aleppo and Idlib stress that the liberation has not yet led to a safe space for political engagement, particularly for women. Authorities and armed actors enforce opaque “red lines”, particularly around work on governance, transitional justice, legal reform, and accountability, forcing organizations to constantly self-censor and frame political issues in depoliticized language.

New regulations extend control deep into organizational life. WHRDs reported on rules that allow authorities to be present during hiring processes and interviews, creating spaces for political vetting and intimidation, and restrictive guardianship provisions that limit women’s autonomy and mobility even in areas no longer under direct regime control. A core tool of repression is gendered defamation, as women who engage in political activity not clearly aligned with de facto authorities can quickly come under attack through accusations targeting their reputation and morality, spread both offline and online.

Donor practices, funding shocks, and organizational strain

Significant funding cuts to relief and health NGOs have had profound impacts on women and WHRDs. Many women’s centers, primary health facilities, and disability services have been forced to close and drastically reduce services such as free clinics, medicines, dignity kits, and psychosocial support, despite increased needs. A woman’s center manager in Idlib described having to make eight staff members redundant and dismantle a previously robust package of education and livelihood programs, leaving only small-scale vocational activities that reach only a fraction of the community.

Moreover, there is an increase in donor shifts towards short-term and regulated projects, with demanding reporting requirements and conditions that prevent participants in women’s safe spaces from taking part in different activities and receiving holistic support, despite the need. This clashes with women’s lived realities: one woman might simultaneously need psychosocial support, literacy classes, and vocational training, but centers are forced to choose which needs to “count” officially, and sometimes allow informal participation without registration or certification, which staff find ethically troubling.

Women’s organizing, safe spaces, and strategic priorities

Although highly restricted and underfunded, women’s organizing and safe spaces run by women-led initiatives in Idlib and northern Aleppo remain among the few multifunctional hubs where women can access protection services, group and individual psychosocial support, skills training, and information on rights within a socially acceptable “center” framework. These spaces also provide women with opportunities to foster solidarity, share experiences of violence, and receive guidance. Despite the reduction in their operations, they remain among the few milieus where women have breathing room and can engage in discussions about social and political change.

Suweida (City and Countryside)

Long-term Marginalization, Economic Crisis, and Gendered Labor

Suweida is a governorate in Southwest Syria with a predominantly Druze population that has been considerably marginalized in terms of state investment, livelihood options, and services, and even more so since the political transition and escalation of violence in 2025. Widespread unemployment, declining public-sector salaries, and inadequate development projects have forced households to rely on remittances and unstable informal work to survive. For women, this translates into increased participation in low-paid, insecure jobs in agriculture, small shops, and home-based production. Such work is often carried out without contracts, social protection, or recognition. At the same time, women carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work with families, which usually means that they have the double burden of economic and emotional labor under conditions of long-term insecurity.



July 2025 attacks, sectarian violence, and displacement

The July 2025 violence in Suweida resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,700 people and involved government forces, government-aligned armed groups, local Druze armed factions, and other actors. Armed groups aligned with the government carried out attacks on Druze villages, including Taara, Al Doura, and Al Douweira, killing many civilians, burning and looting homes, and forcing thousands to flee, often with little more than the clothes they were wearing. These attacks were accompanied by explicit sectarian incitement, including messages calling Druze “infidels” and threatening to abduct and enslave Druze women. Such hate speech not only legitimizes the extreme violence that took place but also underscores a gendered instrumentalization of women’s bodies in sectarian warfare and deepens mistrust in armed actors and state institutions among Druze communities in Syria.

Interviewees emphasized that displacement has had severe consequences for women, many of whom remain housed in collective shelters under extremely difficult conditions. Respondents described prolonged displacement as intensifying psychosocial distress,

economic dependency, and caregiving burdens, particularly for women heading households or caring for extended family members after the loss of homes, livelihoods, or male relatives during recent violence.

Services under strain: health, shelter, and psychosocial support

The escalation of violence had severe impacts on Suweida's already weak public services as health facilities struggled with shortages in medicine, fuel, and trained staff, while dealing with a surge in trauma injuries, chronic disease flare-ups, and psychosomatic conditions resulting from long-term fear, anxiety, and grief. Women face particular difficulties accessing sexual and reproductive health care, as services for maternal health, contraception, and safe delivery are limited and often physically demanding to reach due to checkpoints and sporadic clashes.

The July attacks have displaced many families within and out of Suweida into overcrowded shelters, unfinished buildings, and host households. In such circumstances, privacy is scarce and increases women's exposure to harassment and control due to patriarchal norms. Due to conservative and patriarchal norms, families impose rules on their daughters' movement in the name of 'honor' and protection. WHRDs and humanitarian actors report a sharp increase in women and children who have witnessed killings, abductions, and the destruction of their homes. However, MHPSS programs are often delivered in short-term cycles that end when funding ends, undermining trust and continuity of care.

Patriarchy, militias, and women's bodies as battlegrounds

In Suweida, patriarchal norms that revolve around family and communal 'honor' often intersect with religious authority as well as militias' ability to regulate women's choices. Decisions about women's mobility, dress, education, work, and marriage are constantly negotiated or imposed at the intersection of family councils, religious figures, and armed actors, leaving women with limited space to articulate their own preferences.

Violence against women, such as domestic abuse, forced and early marriage, and so-called crimes in the name of "honor" crimes, is still too often dismissed as a private matter, rather than recognized as a violation of rights. Women who speak out about these abuses can face social exclusion or even retaliation. The July 2025 attacks entrenched [an additional layer of gender-sectarian terror](#) as reports of killings, abductions, and sexual violence against Druze women and girls reinforced the idea that women's bodies are battlegrounds for broader political and sectarian struggles.

WHRDs further described significant restrictions on women's freedom of movement, noting that insecurity along transit routes and fears of targeting have effectively confined many women activists to Suweida. Interviewees reported that women have been unable to safely travel to Damascus, Beirut, and other areas in the region for professional, educational, and advocacy-related engagement. This isolation has significantly constrained women's participation in broader civic and political processes and has further fragmented women-led organizing efforts across Syria.

Interviewees also highlighted the disruption of higher education, noting that many young women enrolled in universities outside Suweida have been unable to continue their studies due to insecurity, movement restrictions, and fears linked to harassment and sectarian targeting. Respondents identified this as an emerging structural concern with potentially long-term implications for women's educational and professional advancement.

Fragmented justice, impunity, and exclusion from national processes

Suweida's justice landscape is characterized by overlapping state remnants, militias, local armed groups, and informal mediation networks, creating a fragmented and often lawless environment. Over the past decade, militias have increasingly assumed policing roles, arresting residents, enforcing their own rules, and intervening in disputes, including family conflicts involving women, with little oversight or accountability.

Furthermore, women who try to seek protection and legal accountability for domestic violence, threats, and enforced disappearance often face harassment, victim blaming, and being pressured to forget and reconcile for the sake of community cohesion. Investigations into the July 2025 attacks in Suweida and the abduction of Druze women and girls have been described by WHRDs interviewed as lacking transparency and slow in the identification of perpetrators, frustrating any hopes of accountability for violations. More broadly, national justice and transitional justice efforts are not meaningfully incorporating gendered or sect-sensitive perspectives, leaving Druze women marginal to truth-seeking, reparations, and institutional reform processes.

WHRDs' Roles, Risks, and Demands for Justice

Despite these conditions, WHRDs and women-led organizations in Suweida continue to perform critical work. They document violations, support families of detainees, the missing, and those killed, provide informal counseling and practical assistance to survivors of violence, and advocate against sectarian violence and for women's rights in local and national forums where possible.

WHRDs report harassment, surveillance, smear campaigns, and threats from both state and non-state actors as a result of their work on human rights violations documentation, engagement with international mechanisms, or publicly criticizing militias and the transitional authorities. Consequently, many have had to relocate within or outside the governorate or to shift to less visible roles. Many WHRDs experience intense burnout as a result of needing to contend with several responsibilities and forces at once: advocacy, financial pressure, the need to secure a livelihood, disproportionate care responsibilities, and ongoing insecurity.

WHRD interviewees from Suweida articulate the need to link local experience to national and international processes and an immediate end to attacks on Druze and other communities in the south. They urge the creation of safe humanitarian corridors and independent, internationally supported investigations into killings, abductions, and sexual violence, with survivors and families of victims meaningfully involved at every stage. Interviewees also highlighted the need for sustained, flexible funding for local organizations to provide legal aid, psychosocial support, GBV awareness, and

cross-community dialogue, and to build solidarity with women in other regions facing intersecting sectarian and gendered violence.

Jaramana

Sectarian Tensions and Targeted Risks

Jaramana is a town located on the outskirts of Damascus with a religiously diverse population, including Druze and Christian communities. It has experienced continuous movement of displaced and migrant communities that even preceded the war. The shifts that have taken place recently in demographics and governance have contributed to intensified tensions and sectarianism between communities. WHRDs from minority backgrounds face heightened risks as they are often accused of political involvement or having foreign ties, making them particular targets for the new government and aligned armed factions. Public shaming, smear campaigns, surveillance, online harassment, and blackmail are tools used to intimidate women and undermine their social standing. WHRDS from Jaramana now tend to avoid media coverage and public appearances for fear of detention and other repercussions, including social reprisals.

Exclusion from Decision-Making and Humanitarian Aid

WHRDs and women-led initiatives often report being excluded from decision-making processes regarding aid allocation, employment programs, and community governance. Elite gatekeepers and recently relocated Syrians previously in the diaspora are usually favored over local WHRDs and initiatives. Humanitarian aid and access to essential services are often politicized and conditional, requiring strong networks and connections and frequently leading to deep inequalities in aid distribution.

Social and Economic Pressures

The residents of Jaramana, particularly those from the displaced population, are currently experiencing significant economic stress. Women and girls work long hours in precarious, menial labor, such as in factories, as domestic cleaners, and on the street, impacting their health and often forcing them to drop out of education. Accumulated financial stressors have led to more gender-based violence, including domestic violence and child marriage.

Infrastructure Strain and Basic Needs

The daily life of Jaramana's population has become more challenging due to an overcrowded housing situation and inadequate public services, resulting from years of displacement. The town's local infrastructure is under strain, and there are frequent shortages of water, electricity, healthcare services, and fuel. Families now often rely on overburdened humanitarian aid programs, and municipal support is insufficient to meet demand, resulting in gaps in essential provisions.

Community Surveillance and Restricted Civic Space

WHRDs described Jaramana's civil space as heavily monitored, which discourages women from participating in public activities and activism. Community surveillance, in particular, restricts women's engagement in public service, journalism, advocacy, and leadership, and impedes their efforts to seek protection. The combination of social norms and the threat of reprisal creates significant obstacles to women's public and professional activities and ability to serve their communities.

Northeast Syria (Kurdish-Majority Areas)

Fragile De-escalation, Recurrent Displacement, and Persistent Insecurity

Despite the [January 2026 ceasefire and integration agreement](#) between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the transitional government in Damascus, WHRDs and women-led civil society organizations in Northeast Syria described the current situation as one of fragile de-escalation rather than meaningful stabilization. While large-scale hostilities have declined, implementation of the agreement remains partial and contested, with repeated allegations of violations, unresolved military integration arrangements, and continued uncertainty around the future governance of Kurdish-majority areas. This ambiguity has generated a pervasive climate of fear and instability across al-Hasakah, Qamishli, Kobani, Amuda, Derik, and surrounding areas.

The interviewees described recent insecurity as having triggered renewed waves of forced displacement, particularly affecting Kurdish families already displaced multiple times from Afrin, Shahba, Sheikh Maqoud, and Ashrafieh, many of whom had resettled in Raqqa, Tabqa, and Deir ez-Zor before once again being uprooted. WHRDs emphasized that repeated displacement has compounded psychosocial distress, economic precarity, and exhaustion, particularly for women-headed households and women caring for extended families under increasingly unstable conditions.

Although returns to some areas are nominally permitted under the integration framework, local respondents stressed that implementation remains inconsistent and uneven. Many displaced families continue to report destroyed, looted, or occupied homes, making return unsafe or practically impossible. For women, these repeated cycles of displacement have deepened vulnerability to poverty, interrupted access to services, and heightened exposure to exploitation and gender-based violence.



Women's Rights Gains Under Threat

Women interviewed consistently expressed profound concern that the ongoing integration process could result in the erosion of institutional protections developed under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), including co-governance structures, women's political representation mechanisms, family law reforms, and legal protections that enabled relatively greater participation of women in public and political life over the past decade.

The absence of clear constitutional guarantees for women's rights and minority protections under the transitional authority has generated widespread anxiety among Kurdish women activists, many of whom fear that integration without binding safeguards could reverse years of hard-won gains. Interviewees described a growing sense of uncertainty about whether women-centered governance structures, including co-presidency models and legal frameworks that protect women's participation, will survive broader centralization efforts.

For many women in northeast Syria, the current transition is not perceived as a democratic opening but as a period of profound uncertainty regarding whether previously secured rights will be preserved or subordinated to political and military bargaining processes.

Humanitarian Pressures and Deteriorating Access to Essential Services

WHRDs described mounting humanitarian pressures linked to disrupted supply chains, restricted movement, and delayed implementation of access arrangements envisioned under the January agreement. Local organizations reported shortages of fuel, medicine, and other essential supplies in several localities, particularly in and around Kobani, where access constraints have significantly increased the cost of basic goods and placed additional strain on already weakened infrastructure.

These shortages carry distinct gendered consequences. Women and girls continue to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for managing household survival under scarcity while facing heightened caregiving burdens as healthcare systems remain overstretched and educational disruptions persist. Interviewees noted that some schools continue to operate intermittently while others have been repurposed as collective shelters for displaced families.

Women's organizations stressed that existing humanitarian responses remain inadequate and insufficiently tailored to women's specific needs, particularly in relation to reproductive healthcare, psychosocial support, and dignified shelter conditions. Local responders emphasized that while solidarity efforts and informal support networks continue to fill critical gaps, they are operating under severe financial and operational strain.

Protection Risks, Militarization, and Social Fragmentation

Interviewees described an increasingly militarized environment characterized by distrust, informal self-defense mobilization, and widespread fears of renewed escalation. Women reported living under persistent insecurity, with many communities relying on informal protective arrangements due to limited confidence in formal guarantees.

WHRDs also raised concerns regarding the resurgence of ISIS-linked sleeper cell activity in parts of al-Hasakah and surrounding rural areas, alongside rising intercommunal distrust between Kurdish and Arab communities. Several respondents linked these developments to broader concerns about instability and the potential re-emergence of localized armed violence.

For women, this insecurity is intensified by fears of gendered violence in the event of renewed conflict. Interviewees repeatedly referenced reports of abductions, sexual violence, and sectarian targeting in other regions of Syria as reinforcing anxieties about what renewed escalation could mean for Kurdish women. The cumulative result is a protection crisis in which women's insecurity is shaped not only by direct threats of violence but also by uncertainty, militarization, and the erosion of institutional trust.

Exclusion from National Decision-Making and Transitional Justice Processes

WHRDs from northeast Syria consistently reported feeling excluded from national-level decision-making processes related to constitutional reform, transitional justice, and post-conflict governance. Interviewees described newly established justice and accountability mechanisms as lacking both inclusivity and legitimacy, noting the minimal representation of Kurdish women, ethnic minorities, and grassroots civil society actors.

Many expressed concern that transitional justice processes will fail to gain credibility unless they meaningfully incorporate communities from northeast Syria and address both historical violations and ongoing abuses. Respondents emphasized that sustainable peace will require meaningful political participation by Kurdish women, enforceable constitutional guarantees for minority and women's rights, independent monitoring of agreement implementation, and sustained international pressure to ensure accountability.

Without these safeguards, WHRDs warned that the current transition risks reproducing exclusionary governance structures rather than laying the foundation for an inclusive and democratic Syria.



Recommendations for International Stakeholders, Donors, and Governments

Survivor-led Justice & Accountability

- Develop and consolidate a comprehensive, gender-transformative justice and accountability process, ensuring it is designed and led by victims and their families from planning through implementation.
- Ensure that justice and accountability processes address all perpetrators of international crimes in Syria, including atrocities of the past and crimes committed under the new government.
- Support existing international accountability mechanisms, including the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons, which was established to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in Syria and support families.
- Provide comprehensive assistance to survivors of mass atrocities and their families, including rehabilitation services as well as mental health and psychosocial support.

Holistic Protection and Well-being

- Provide comprehensive support to WHRDs, including accompaniment, emergency funds for relocation, psychosocial care, and digital security training.
- Consolidate community-based and gender-sensitive mental health programs addressing trauma from overlapping forms of violence, displacement, and enforced disappearance.

Social Cohesion & Violence Prevention

- Support the establishment of inter-community dialogue initiatives that include different sects, ethnicities, genders, and other groups to mitigate communal mistrust and foster collaboration.
- Establish confidential GBV and violence reporting hubs outside formal structures to address fear of reprisals.
- Promote community-mobilizing campaigns to combat stigma and discrimination toward survivors of sectarian and gendered violence.

The Economy and Public Sectors

- In collaboration with local civil society actors, including women-led initiatives, provide comprehensive humanitarian assistance for healthcare, food security, and essential services. Ensure that women, children, and other vulnerable groups receive priority support.
- Provide urgent support to hospitals and the healthcare system to restore buildings and infrastructure, supply equipment and medicines, and invest in training and retaining medical staff.
- Provide family stipends or conditional cash to sustain girls' school attendance.
- Provide alternative schooling in regions affected by road closures or security threats and invest in teacher recruitment, training, and retention, and prioritize conflict-affected and rural areas.

Strategic Principles

Prioritize Grassroots Over Elites

- Provide direct core and flexible funding to grassroots women-led initiatives and organizations, especially in underserved and conflict-affected areas.
- Establish mechanisms for rapid funding and support in response to emergent crises.

Flexible and Adaptive Funding

- Adjust grant frameworks to accommodate uncertainty and unforeseen circumstances.
- Establish participatory monitoring and evaluation processes, co-designed with WHRDs, to ensure the development of impactful measurement tools.

Long-Term Engagement

- Provide multi-year funding cycles, develop trust-based relationships with partners on the ground, and conduct periodic consultations to address evolving needs.
- Consolidate infrastructure and networks to ensure sustainability beyond short-lived intervention cycles.

Inclusive Governance & Genuine Consultation

- Establish regular, binding consultative councils featuring WHRDs, including those who are structurally excluded, and ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making and policy formation.
- Require aid and recovery projects to document and demonstrate inclusive consultation, including metrics for including the voices of structurally excluded women.

Transparent and Equitable Aid

- Create and implement public, transparent, and need-based criteria for aid distribution to mitigate favoritism and politicization.
- Ensure robust anonymous feedback channels to highlight exclusion, corruption, or unfairness in aid allocation.



Femena supports women human rights defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. Femena's work is particularly focused on contexts where civic space is shrinking or closed, as well as contexts impacted by authoritarianism, conflict, extremism and fascism. Femena aims to raise awareness about the impact of these trends on women, feminist movements and civic organizing. Femena's country and regional reports provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and target feminist movements. These reports also provide recommendations on how to support women's rights, women human rights defenders at risk and protect civic space, while strengthening feminist movements.

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