

Research paper about Gender and Peace building in Syria in the last 15 years

Literature Review:

1. Context of the Issues:

Since 2011, Syria experienced devastating conflict that reshaped its socio-political situation, affected communities, and altered social gender structures. The war has led to widespread displacement inside and outside Syria, economic instability, and loss of livelihood means and gave rise to an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Gender roles and relations have also undergone significant changes. Many women, in the absence of male family members adopted new responsibilities as breadwinners, leading to shifts in traditional gender dynamics. All the same, these changes did not necessarily induce substantial female empowerment, as women continue to face gender barriers such as limited access to resources, increased vulnerability to gender-based violence, restricted participation in decision-making processes, and limited access to essential services such as education, healthcare and legal support.

Additionally, women and girls in Syria continue to face violence in the public and private sphere in the form of early and forced marriages, trafficking, detention (a common regime tactic practiced either on women or girls or their relatives), in addition to forced disappearances, yet the issue which has been the center of attention by the international community relates to the sexual violence perpetrated by ISIS (Staszewska, 2017).

The conflict has paradoxically intensified gendered inequalities while simultaneously highlighting the critical role women play in the resilience and recovery of their communities. Noteworthy that such communities remain under the influence of traditional gender norms which can negatively affect the daily lives of women and girls and deepen the emotional and psychological burden they carry.

Significant challenges persist as peacebuilding efforts attempt to address the shift that has altered traditional family and community dynamics. This shift presents a promising avenue, for it encourages programs focusing on women and peacebuilding to promulgate female empowerment and adopt gender-sensitive approaches. Nonetheless, sustainable peace remains elusive should these efforts go without fully addressing the gendered impacts of the conflict and fostering the inclusion of women in peace processes.

2. Theoretical Framework:

The gender transformative approach (GTA) provides an essential lens to examine the intersection of gender and peacebuilding in the Syrian context. This approach seeks to fundamentally challenge and alter unequal gender norms, roles, and relations that are often exacerbated by conflict. By addressing the root causes of gender inequality, GTA aims to promote sustainable inclusive and equitable peacebuilding. This framework draws on gender theory, which explores the social construction of gender roles, and conflict transformation theory, which stresses the need to reshape social structures to support lasting peace. This theoretical grounding guides the investigation into how current peacebuilding programs incorporate gender considerations, assess community resilience,

and engage both women and men as active agents of change, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of peace and stability in Syria.

3. Identifying the Research Gap:

Existing studies on the literature pertaining to gender and peacebuilding have documented the challenges faced by women during conflict, yet research on gender and peacebuilding within the Syrian context remains limited. Notably, there is also a lack of comprehensive research on how gender dynamics affect Syrian women and contribute to peacebuilding process.

Furthermore, existing literature often disregards the role of conflict in changing and reshaping gender roles, and has yet to examine how changes in gender roles impact community resilience and long-term peace prospects. Studies on the effectiveness of gender transformative approaches in Syria, most notably their role in shifting entrenched gender norms within war-affected communities, are limited as well. On the same topic, the intersectional experiences of rural women in peacebuilding processes remain largely unexplored. Addressing the aforementioned gaps is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of how gender-sensitive approaches could enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts in Syria. In light of this, the research paper contributes to the literature on gender and peacebuilding in Syria by filling in these gaps. It seeks to provide an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the daily experiences of Syrian community members and active humanitarian actors and the roles they play in shaping peacebuilding processes.

Research aims and questions:

1. The research aims to:

- Explore how the conflict has reshaped gender roles and relations, focusing on both opportunities and challenges for women, girls, men, and boys.
- Investigate the interrelationships between gender dynamics in women and peacebuilding programs in the Syrian context during the last 15 years.
- Assess the effectiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) activities in peacebuilding and their potential to enhance community resilience.
- Examine the nuanced experiences of Syrian women during the conflict, focusing on those regarding gender-based violence, access to services, and participation in decision-making.
- Analyze current peacebuilding programs in Syria so as to evaluate their integration of gender considerations and the extent to which they address the needs and rights of women.

2. The research questions:

The research paper addresses the following questions:

- a. What are the characteristics of gender dynamics in the Syrian context?
- b. In what ways has the Syrian conflict impacted traditional gender roles for men, women, boys, and girls?

- c. How were the daily life conditions of women affected during conflict? Has any improvement or regression been observed?
- d. What are the key barriers to implementing gender transformative approaches in Syrian peacebuilding programs? How can Syrian community members and leaders of peacebuilding organizations collectively address these barriers?
- e. In what ways did women's participation and roles in peacebuilding evolve in Syria over the past 15 years?

Methodology:

This research paper **explores the link between gender and peacebuilding across five governorates in Syria**. It seeks to **interrelationship between gender dynamics and women in peacebuilding processes**. The methodology is designed to comprehensively capture the experiences of Syrian men, women, girls and boys **who were impacted by the conflict**. It also seeks to understand the degree to which leaders of peacebuilding programs in Syria have affected Syrian women's engagement in peacebuilding. This methodology supports a deep, contextual analysis that respects voices of participants and captures the complex dynamics between gender and peacebuilding.

- **Ontology:** The research rejects and deviates from masculine Cartesian ontologies that project a view of reality is grounded and operates based on dualism. Reality is not a being in and of itself, but is rather fluid, changeable, and dynamic. In light of this, reality is ever-changing and evolving; that is, the social world is in the process of being constantly shaped, reshaped, molded. People hailing from diverse backgrounds understand reality based on their own subjective experiences, interpretations, perceptions, and emotions. People- far from being bound by essentialist terms and positions- are active agents who engage in the construction, understanding, and interpretation of various social phenomena. Moreover, people's realities and experiences are shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts, and change in different circumstances.
- **Epistemology:** The research draws on **critical realist epistemology**. This theory of epistemology presents a complex and dynamic analysis of reality. Individuals are social constructions that are shaped by specific historical and cultural discourses. Nonetheless, these discourses are not stable or fixed, but can be changed and redefined. The theory argues that the data collected by researchers does not capture all that is real or actual at that moment; there are underlying structural mechanism (religious, social, political, ideological, economic etc..) that interact in complex ways to generate the social phenomenon. By deploying scientific methods and proper analysis, researchers can develop an understanding of the causes of these mechanisms, and can thus challenge them to generate better outcomes in the social world.
- **Research approach:** This research is guided by a **qualitative interpretive approach** to explore the link between gender and peacebuilding amongst Syrian community members and leaders in organizations, whilst focusing on the role of

women in peacebuilding processes. This approach allows for an in-depth and nuanced exploration of the participants' perspectives through descriptive data.

- **Methods:** Data was through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. One semi-structured interviews held with one community leaders, 5 focus group discussions conducted with Syrian men and women, and one SSI conducted we members of local peacebuilding organizations. The duration of each interview and FGD was
- **Sample:** The research deploys a **purposive sampling technique**. For the purpose of understanding the effects of the conflict on traditional gender roles as well the daily conditions of the those impacted by it, the researchers recruited men, women, boys, and girls from five Syrian governorates. Engaging women and girls will not only allow for an in-depth understanding of their daily realities, but also serves to amplify their voices through their narratives. Engaging men and boys are equally important, for women's experiences cannot be understood in isolation. An understanding of gender dynamics necessitates the presence of persons with diverging gender identities (men, women, boys, and girls). Additionally, leaders and members of peacebuilding organizations were selected for the purpose of analyzing the impact of peacebuilding programs on community resilience and the barriers for implementing a gender transformative approach in these programs.
- **An inductive approach to data analysis** deployed and involved thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and insights within participants' narratives, providing a framework to understand gender dynamics and peacebuilding efforts in Syria.

Ethical conduct:

- Upon contacting the potential participants, researchers explained the purpose of the research and the use of the collected information.
- Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts on issues that were not discussed during the FGDs and KIs. Respondents were interviewed only after providing their voluntary and informed verbal consent to participate in the assessment.
- Researchers are committed to ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants at all times, and for this purpose the names of the participant names were not included in the transcript of the FGD's nor in the KIs.

Findings:

a. The gender dynamics characteristics in the Syrian context:

- Dynamics within family structures:
Participants who are community members from both genders, perceive the relationships between men and women as traditional, where the final say within

the family belongs to the man, and the woman complies. This local mindset dominates most responses, with some even granting men the right to control women's lives, regardless of the absence of any real differences between them. This, in itself, reflects the significant impact of gender norms, which are deeply ingrained in the minds of both women and men, leading them to believe that societal discrimination is justified.

*"My husband said: 'Nothing ruined the world more than the phrase "Women are half of society, 'You're just a slipper, and I'll throw you away". These words have completely destroyed me"*¹

- Dynamics in work environments and job types:
The answers indicate that the distribution of power differs in opinions across governorates. For Aleppo, which shows the greatest divergence, the results reveal a growing tendency toward favoring women, whereas in other governorates, such as Tartous, Homs, and Hama, the preference still leans toward men, justified by claims of physical strength socially, religiously, and legally. Regarding role distribution, despite women being largely confined to domestic tasks, which are viewed as their primary societal role, recent times have witnessed a gradual shift, with women starting to work outside the home, albeit within socially defined frameworks.

*"My husband tells me, 'Who are you to teach me"*².

In Aleppo, where opinions differ the most, there is a perceived shift toward women, as some believe that job opportunities for men have declined. Others argue that physical appearance has become a factor reducing men's opportunities, even though stereotypical associations between appearance and women, rather than men, persist and influence the gendered division of labor. However, in other governorates like Tartous, Homs, and Hama, the preference remains for men, based on arguments of physical strength, with societal, religious, and legal justifications assigning men higher social value. This, as noted by a participant from Tartous, is reflected in discrimination between sons and daughters.

Some opinions from Aleppo and Hama also highlighted minimal discrimination between men and women, with shared responsibilities being more common due to education and family support for this model. This can be interpreted as individual cases, as the dominant trend in responses indicates otherwise. Nevertheless, this suggests a small but notable movement toward change.

"But the people in the area where I live look at us strangely because we go with our friend three times a week. For them, this is unacceptable". A young woman from Hama
The participants also highlighted some aspects of the gender discrimination as the following: Frustration and social isolation are some of the most prominent psychological effects that women experience as a result of gender-based violence. In this context, empowerment, strength, and self-reliance become essential qualities for women to navigate their unique struggles. Unfortunately, many women are treated as domestic

¹Female, FGD, Tartous.

² Female, FGD, Homs.

servants, expected to fulfill assigned tasks without the right to object. Their work is often viewed as shameful, and parents frequently fail to support their daughters, even when they are in need.

The burden of responsibilities continues to increase for women, both within the family and in the broader society. This is further exacerbated by the unequal division of labor between men and women, both at home and outside. Physical and psychological violence are inflicted upon women, often masked by harmful gender norms, reflecting the dominance of Eastern societal mindsets in shaping gender relations.

“Most men marginalize women, and women remain consistently oppressed in our society.” A young woman from Tartous

The activists of the civic society organizations emphasized that women have a stronger presence in civil work, while men have limited participation in peacebuilding efforts. However, men dominate most power and authority structures across various sectors, which diminishes the impact of women's roles. They also control fields such as trade and law in Damascus, where women's representation is limited and often symbolic, aimed at achieving gender balance without actual influence.

Thus, a community leader interviewed explained that in the Syrian context, patriarchal parenting has contributed to the imbalance between men and women as per the data context analysis which determined that men are often taught that they have the right to restrict women's freedom in matters such as work, education, mobility, and clothing. This imbalance is further exacerbated by legal discrimination, as the concept of male guardianship over women is widely propagated, implying control over them. The commitment of men to provide food, housing, and medical care for women leads women to naturally relinquish their right to be independent and capable of managing their own lives; this being the "price of guardianship".

b. The impact of the Syrian conflict on traditional gender roles:

The responses reveal that the crisis has placed women in front of new challenges, forcing them to adapt and take on additional responsibilities amidst significant economic and social changes. Across various governorates, the crisis has impacted the distribution of roles, which have started to shift away from the traditional frameworks that were previously limited to men. However, circumstances have, in some cases, restricted their roles. Stereotypes have influenced the type of work women can pursue and how society perceives it, although the harsh living conditions have managed to break many taboos, leading to a gradual societal acceptance of these changes.

“A female taxi driver, everyone in the neighborhood looked at her with astonishment, but it’s clear that she needs this job.” A young woman from Hama

For example, in Aleppo, women have become the primary breadwinners in many families due to the loss of men. In Homs, women have demonstrated their ability to balance work and studies, despite their freedom being affected by security issues and the lack of safety. Similarly, in Hama, the economic crisis and migration have driven women to work to cover increasing expenses, which has also impacted the stability of family relationships. In Tartous, harsh financial conditions have led to the collapse of

some families, pushing women to learn new skills to secure a livelihood, while external aid has been affected by the global financial crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Due to the prevalence of ignorance, a woman is criticized for any action she takes, while a man is not”. A young woman from Homos

The overall of the answers emphasized that the timeline of the gender roles changes has been started in 2009 where 70% of the gender roles have changed. Knowing that before 2011, there was balance, but the reduction in the number of men after the war forced women to leave their homes, work, and take on additional responsibilities. Women's work transitioned from being a choice or luxury in 2009 to a necessity after the war, as they were compelled to contribute to household expenses. Despite these efforts, both men and women now struggle to balance their responsibilities and must support one another to sustain their households.

A woman from Tartous says that despite working, society still doesn't recognize her, and she faces harassment. Another participant notes that the working conditions are uncomfortable and unsafe, but they accept the work because they need it.

The local leader pointed out that although the scope of new roles taken by women has expanded due to the crisis, it has not rebalanced the power dynamics. The balance of power within the household remained unchanged, as despite women having money, they still cannot control this income.

Additionally, civil society activists highlighted the increased participation of women in intellectual professions, such as law, where they have recorded success. The representation in projects managed by local authorities and in leadership positions has also expanded. However, there has been no breakthrough in financial control in these areas, as it remains in the hands of men. As mentioned earlier, issues of harassment in work environments have continued to rise, along with the societal difficulty in accepting these new roles. The most prominent challenge remains the lower wages women receive compared to men

c. The daily life conditions of women during and after conflict:

The overall responses indicate that the crisis has contributed to positive changes in the traditional gender roles across the different Syrian governorates in diverse ways. The war and crisis in Tartous helped free women from social constraints and inherited traditions, giving some of them greater freedom and autonomy in decision-making and managing their lives. Thus, the crisis also pushed women to work in professions traditionally reserved for men, thus strengthening their role in the family and society, despite traditional attitudes remaining. Moreover, in Homs, positive changes occurred, as girls became able to travel and work independently, something that was previously rare or unacceptable. In Hama, the impact of the crisis was mixed, with some women experiencing positive changes in their self-perception, such as a desire to work and expand their roles. In Aleppo, women's participation in the labor market contributed to their self-fulfillment and increased independence, but it also brought greater responsibilities and burdens. Work can provide financial stability and a strong social foundation for women.

“Work provides financial stability. It can also give women a strong social foundation”.

A young woman from Aleppo.

It is clear that despite the positive changes, these transformations have had negative impacts on women. For example, they have faced criticism and pressure from both society and their families due to their new roles, even though they provide financial and emotional support to their families. This, in itself, has complicated their daily lives. Other negative outcomes, such as an increase in the abuse of women, child marriages, mental health issues, and a decline in marriage rates among women born in the 1990s, were also highlighted in the responses.

The economic crisis in Syria has contributed to a significant rise in the cost of living and severe shortages of essential goods, which prompted women to seek employment. Those who work have seen an increase in their working hours, particularly when their husbands are absent due to illness, death, or disappearance. Participants also confirmed that women's mental health has been impacted by the immense pressures resulting from increased responsibilities and living challenges. Moreover, women face difficulties in allocating enough time to care for their children which leads to neglect. Some responses indicating that women choose to stop working after childbirth to focus on raising children, due to the unfair distribution of roles and tasks between women and men.

"Psychological stress has also led to the release of anger in the form of domestic violence, such as hitting children." A young woman from Hama

The community leader added that the continued spread of weapons and the lack of laws protecting women expose them to increased violence in both public and domestic spaces. This raises levels of sexual harassment and impacts women's ability to participate in public affairs, as well as within the home. The importance of women's role in the peacebuilding process was highlighted, as they are among the most affected by war and violence. It was also emphasized that women should be integrated into peacebuilding programs and protected from violence, not merely used as symbols of peace, especially since women are subjected to sexual assaults and abductions during conflicts. Women endure significant suffering due to wars, including the loss of loved ones and the violence committed against them. This suffering makes women the driving force behind peacebuilding, as peace cannot be achieved without the genuine and effective participation of women at all levels.

d. Barriers and resources to implement gender transformative approach within Syrian peacebuilding programs:

The participants identified the key gender norms that need transformation in Syria, including gender discrimination, gender-based violence, and the stereotypical roles assigned to each gender. They pointed out that the main barrier to implementing a gender transformative approach is time.

Additionally, as per the participants, the social barriers are social discrimination against women, reduce and disregard the success of women due to the traditional gender roles. Social change is a gradual process that requires continuous efforts and cannot be achieved through short-term programs, which is the current situation.

“Women are undervalued for their achievements simply because they are mothers or do not hold higher educational degrees, reflecting the condescending view of some members of society towards traditional female roles”. A young woman from Tartous

Therefore, efforts to shift societal views must involve both men and women, considering their perspectives to effectively challenge and transform deeply ingrained beliefs. This approach is particularly challenging in the Syrian context, where emergency response interventions have focused more on immediate relief than on addressing the root causes of gender norms. While these interventions have helped reduce violence against women and girls, they are insufficient on their own. Long-term change requires repeated sessions and ongoing reinforcement, as single sessions are not enough to create sustainable transformation.

“Awareness takes a long time to develop, and there is still a need for continuous efforts to motivate others to change”. A young woman from Hama

Another obstacle has been identified by the participants across the governates is the lack of promotion for these programs, as they have not reached sufficient audiences due to weak media coverage. Other responses highlighted the issue of local community awareness of these programs, where the public perceived them as providing recreational activities, and there was a low willingness to participate due to increased economic and social pressures, which diminished the desire to engage.

“Many people tend to focus on the material benefits of programs rather than the social benefits they provide.” A young man from Homos

A participant from Aleppo, emphasized that some actors provide awareness services and utilize resources, but they do not always have the capacity to meet the required standards. The presence of varying intentions within the community may affect the outcomes of awareness efforts and lead to unintended exploitation. A misunderstanding of the nature of awareness programs aimed at changing harmful gender norms constitutes one of the obstacles, as there is no widespread social acceptance of these ideas. A participant from Hama also noted an increase in divorce cases due to certain perceptions regarding women's independence.

The local community faces challenges in implementing transformative programs. As the community leader pointed out, they currently have only their voices to raise against violence. He emphasized that their ability to influence is their most significant tool for driving change in laws, such as the Syrian Women's Association, which collaborated with partners to draft legislation protecting women from violence both within and outside the family. Funding serves as both a resource and a challenge. While it enables services to address gender-based violence, such as shelters for survivors, these resources remain unavailable due to restrictions on the freedom to establish women's organizations.

According to the interviewed community leader, the most prominent challenges are the presence of a single group controlling the reins of power in Syria. Despite the recent success of the revolution, there remains a fear of the regime's approach, as it is tainted by fundamentalist thinking, which is one of the biggest challenges currently. Thus, the unclear vision of this ruling faction regarding Syria's near future, civil work, and

freedoms, including the freedom to form associations or political parties that could support and engage with civil society organizations, is a major concern. All these issues related to the nature of governance in the upcoming phase, which is still unclear, create a sense of apprehension. Additionally, the feminist movement during the crisis was characterized by its opposition to the policies of the previous regime, but the current challenge lies in how it will operate in the near future.

Activists in civil society organizations addressed the challenges facing civil society, such as resistance and the lack of acceptance of women's roles. However, there is hope for activating these roles due to the current fertile ground. They also mentioned the disbelief some have in the ability of concepts like gender and gender transformative approaches to bring about real change, emphasizing that while there is significant work being done, changes may sometimes lead to setbacks, especially in the context of peacebuilding. The importance of adapting terminology to people's needs and adopting these ideas in a way that fits their reality was also highlighted. Additionally, there is an acknowledgment of the gap between adopted concepts and the community's needs, requiring efforts to bridge this gap.

e. Women's participation and roles in peacebuilding in Syria over the past 15 years:

The participants proposed several ideas for integrating the gender transformative approach into Syrian peacebuilding programs. They emphasized the importance of activities that build women's confidence and reduce stress by challenging misconceptions about violence and gender. Additionally, they highlighted the need for involving men, especially in rural areas, and engaging youth in programs aimed at raising awareness and driving cultural change.

Livelihood programs, such as those providing vocational training in activities like sewing, were seen as essential in offering financial support to women. However, challenges persist in encouraging older generations to embrace these changes. The participants also suggested that incorporating these changes into school curricula or national laws would lead to deeper and more sustainable impacts.

While dialogue and awareness sessions were recognized as effective, their societal impact was acknowledged to require time to become evident. Furthermore, remote workshops targeting women and children in rural areas were noted for their contribution to reducing violence and cases of child marriage.

The participants shared some examples about the women's participation and roles in peacebuilding in Syria over the past 15 years which are:

- In Tartous: "Family Planning Association" have played a significant role in improving the lives of women and their families through psychological support, material aid, awareness sessions, and vocational training.
- In Homs: "Red Crescent" and the "Resilient Despite the Wounds" Association, have contributed by offering programs targeted at people with disabilities, women, and children of the wounded, in addition to supporting small businesses

for women and providing financial assistance. Also, despite limited resources, small teams like the "Thiqah" team and initiatives from sports clubs like Al-Karama Club and Al-Wathba Club have played a role in supporting vulnerable groups during crises.

Here are examples from various governorates regarding the participation of women and their role in peacebuilding programs in Syria over the past 15 years:

- **Tartus:** Women are striving for financial independence and personal development, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and encouraging each other to try new things. They also create safe spaces for self-expression and actively engage in facing challenges. Their persistence in pursuing their goals despite difficulties is considered a step toward creating an environment that promotes peacebuilding in the local community. Additionally, opening small businesses or learning new skills has played a role in empowering women. Despite limited awareness of these initiatives, women lead them with the aim of reducing violence and promoting social cohesion, which calls for spreading a culture of peace and supporting these efforts.
- **Homs:** Women have contributed to reducing violence in some households, where dialogue with family members (especially fathers) has increased, providing more spaces for understanding.
- **Hama:** There is recognition of women's ability to influence conflict resolution and promote social cohesion. However, some believe that decisions should be jointly made by men and women, with a focus on the importance of mental health.

The economic and social crisis has exacerbated violence due to the absence of authority and law, making violence more widespread, particularly against women who are suffering from a lack of security. Despite efforts to empower women and achieve their independence, domestic violence remains a major obstacle that affects their quality of life and stability. This is especially due to psychological and social pressures that have intensified violence against women, contributing to the escalation of domestic violence, including women abusing their children. Moreover, women's desire to prove themselves outside the home has led to increased exposure to violence, as they face significant challenges in combating violence while striving to work or achieve independence. Responses also indicated that women have the ability to intervene and resolve conflicts, yet some still view women as socially unempowered to make decisions.

According to the interviewed community leader Syrian women have had a pioneering experience in establishing the Women's Advisory Council. However, despite the great success of the Council, women's participation in negotiation delegations remained modest. This limited participation is attributed to the patriarchal mentality that does not recognize the importance of women's presence in negotiation delegations. Even when women are included, they are not given their true and effective role.

Civil society activists discussed the role of women in peacebuilding programs, citing the saying "women make peace, men make war" to emphasize that women played a key

role in making peace through their decisions, while men make wars through their decisions. However, this perspective reflects a discriminatory view and a stereotype that centers emotion in women and reason in men.

They also pointed out that women had a central role in community work as leaders, entering communities and becoming a crucial part of community activities. The success of community and civil gatherings led by women stood out, as they were more impactful, such as the example of the Women's Advisory Council, which brought together women from various geographical and societal backgrounds who shared a common opinion. It is also noted that the Women's Advisory Council was more successful than the constitutional committee or the civil chamber, which includes both men and women.