

An Intersectional Analysis of Syrian Women's Participation in Civil Society in the Post-2011 Context

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Based on qualitative research conducted in Lebanon and Turkey in 2018, this paper centers on Syrian women working in various civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Syrian post-2011 context. It examines conflict and host-context impacts on Syrian women's participation in CSOs. Using an intersectional framework derived from feminist studies, it argues that gender, socioeconomic status and ethnic/national identity are key intersect-

ing social markers that influence the ability of Syrian women to participate in CSOs in these countries. Findings also demonstrate the value of intersectional approaches in improving our current understanding of discriminatory practices against Syrian women in civil society.

Keywords: Syria, Civil Society, Intersectionality, Gender, Conflict

Introduction

Entering its tenth year, the Syrian civil war continues to produce the largest global mass displacement of our time. According to UNHCR, 5.6 million Syrians have fled their homeland seeking refuge in neighboring countries since 2011, while 6.6 million are internally displaced. They rely on assistance from the world's "humanitarian club," the collective of Western donors, United Nations (UN) agencies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) (Dixon et al. 110) and support from growing numbers of host organizations and those of Syrian civil society (CSOs).

In times of conflict, women from civil society play a key role in achieving peace and creating more gender-inclusive postwar societies (Mazurana and Proctor 24; Bhattacharya 233; Bell and O'Rourke 300; Colvin 334; Manchanda 4743; D. K. Singh 658). Post-2011 literature claims that the participation of Syrian women in civil society has increased (Williamson 3; Fourn 11) but remains restricted to lower organizational levels (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 9; Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad 7). Syrian CSOs before the war exhibited the same gender inequality in leadership. In 2010, although equal numbers of men and women were employed in Syrian CSOs, only 13 percent of leadership positions were held by women (Al-Khoury et al. 13).¹ This under-

representation implies that female perspectives are lacking in organizations working to assist primarily women and children in a war context.

“Humanitarian club” funding with its ability to direct the global development agenda (Dixon et al. 110) transfers neoliberal notions of gender equality into local CSO structures and projects (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 21; Fourn 16; Al-Zou'bi and lyad 23). Conflict itself influences women's traditional gender roles² enabling them to overcome exclusionary practices and access male-dominated activities in public spaces, assume new roles as heads of households, and increase civic and political engagement (Buvinic et al. 112).

Since the conflict began, few studies have addressed the post-2011 participation of Syrian women in civil society. This paper addresses this gap for Syrian women working in international, host and Syrian CSOs in Turkey and Lebanon after the war. It attempts to answer the following questions: How has the ongoing Syrian conflict and host-country context influenced the participation of Syrian women in CSOs? Which key social markers intersect with gender in each context and limit this participation?

Studies on gender inequalities in Syrian civil society, such as Rabo's *Gender, State and Civil Society in Jordan and Syria* often

focus on gender aspects. Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin, for example, attribute the Syrian women's leadership and decision-making exclusion in Syrian CSOs to gender insensitivities in the CSOs and to mirroring existing societal gender hierarchies at the workplace (9). Similarly, humanitarian-aid discourses treat Syrian women affected by the conflict as a single category, vulnerable and needing further *empowering* or *awareness* (Couldrey and Peebles 34). This homogenization lacks contextual analysis and ignores the influence of other factors such as class and rural/urban origins on Syrian women's positionalities.

This paper is the first to apply an intersectional approach derived from African-American feminist studies in the latest work by Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, to identify social markers influencing Syrian women's ability to participate in civil society. Intersectional approaches critique earlier feminist theories that assumed all women shared a common reality (Campbell and Wasco 781; Kiguwa 227). Systems of oppression are regarded as interlocking; race, class and gender are key social markers involved in defining African-American women's realities. Ever since then numerous feminist researches have examined intersections of gender with other factors

such as age, dis/abilities, ethnicity, nationality, academic status, space and geopolitical location, settler colonialism, sexuality, language and legal status (Kiguwa 228; López et al. and Chavez 5).

This paper argues that the ongoing conflict situation in Syria and resulting displacement have triggered changes in the traditional gender roles of Syrian women and increased their participation in civil society. In the context of Turkey and Lebanon, the intersectional analysis reveals that gender, socioeconomic status and ethnic/national identity are key intersecting social markers influencing the ability of Syrian women to participate in CSOs, placing them in varying positions of privilege or disadvantage.

Findings are based on qualitative research conducted by the author during her doctoral field research in 2018. Data was collected through 80 in-depth interviews conducted by the author with Syrian women and men in host, Syrian, and international CSOs, in addition to expert interviews with government, academic and research institutions in both countries.

To contextualize findings, this paper begins by outlining the current conditions of Syrians and Syrian CSOs in Lebanon and Turkey, the two countries hosting the greatest numbers of Syrian refugees. The following sections will illustrate in greater

depth how the conflict and identified social markers influence Syrian women's current civil-society participation in these countries.

A Precarious Existence: Living Conditions of Syrians in Lebanon & Turkey

According to UNHCR, Turkey presently hosts an estimated 3.7 million Syrian refugees and Lebanon one million ever since Syrians first began crossing borders in April 2011 to escape the civil war. These refugees are unable to claim rights awarded by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, a fact with serious implications for their living conditions, rights and future prospects. Turkey is signatory to the convention, but with a geographical limitation granting asylum rights exclusively to European refugees (Chatty 21), while Lebanon has refrained from signing the convention to avoid any legal obligations toward Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon since 1948 (Shamieh 55). From the outset, the governments of Lebanon and Turkey adopted contrasting strategies for managing the refugee crisis. Lebanon granted Syrians six-month visas based on existing bilateral agreements (Kabbanji and Kabbanji 14) and shifted responsibility for the refugees to CSOs and international organizations, particularly UNHCR, all of which became the

main providers of health, education and livelihood assistance (Janmyr 4; Civil Society Knowledge Centre, "Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality" 15). Turkey adopted an open-door policy under the framework of "temporary protection" (İçduygu et al. 452). It took over UNHCR's responsibility for determining refugee status (Woods 12) and shouldered full responsibility for the refugees by applying a non-camp and government-financed approach that encouraged self-settlement outside the government-built refugee camps (World Bank 2; Chatty 20). New laws were introduced to address Syrian refugees' rights in 2013/14. Syrian refugees were granted *guest* status and placed under a newly established General Directorate of Migration Management (GDMM). Their access to health care and education was formalized. They were also permitted to work in defined sectors and to register their businesses (İçduygu et al. 462). By 2018, there were approximately 8,000 registered refugee-owned businesses in Turkey (Yassin 104). Outside the camps, Turkish CSOs are a main source of assistance for Syrians (Mackreath and Sağnıç 2). In 2016, the *EU-Turkey deal* promised Turkey 3€ billion in return for preventing illegal migrants reaching Europe and improving the living conditions of Syrians

internally (Singh 10). Government policies shifted toward supporting integration in education and the labor market (Cloeters et al. 11) and in that same year President Erdoğan announced that Syrians in Turkey meeting certain requirements could receive Turkish citizenship (Şimşek 177). No similar shift toward integration or improving living conditions occurred in Lebanon. The Lebanese government still refuses to acknowledge the presence of refugees on its land, labeling Syrian refugees as "temporarily displaced individuals" (Janmyr 7). When their numbers surpassed one million, it ordered UNHCR to suspend registration of additional refugees and thus resulting in increased illegal migration and worsening living conditions for illegal refugees (Janmyr 18; Shamieh 60; Kabbanji and Kabbanji 27). Syrians can reside in Lebanon only if they are sponsored by a Lebanese citizen as economic migrants in a very limited number of occupations,³ or if they possess a UNHCR registration certificate (Janmyr 15). The Lebanese government has been criticized for redirecting developmental aid to support Lebanese benefactors instead of Syrian refugees (Kabbanji and Kabbanji 32), for discouraging income-generating projects to prevent settlement and integration, and for prohibiting UNHCR from building permanent refugee camps

(Kabbanji and Kabbanji 13; Chatty 20; Yassin et al. 37).

Compared to Lebanon, Turkey's management of the refugee crisis evinced greater respect for the dignity of the refugees as well as for their agency (Chatty 30). However, studies show that displaced Syrians in both countries suffer from negative social attitudes toward them and exploitation in the labor market and hence resulting in informal employment and low wages that place many families below the poverty line (Semerci and Erdoğan 26; Şimşek 7; Shamieh 64). This forces families to resort to negative coping strategies which include child labor as well as child marriage which has quadrupled among some Syrian refugee communities compared to before 2011 (Yassin 23; Kivilcim 201; Woods 20).

In Turkey, the language barrier and administrative bureaucracy limit the ability of Syrians to benefit from rights awarded to them by the government as well as causing further challenges in education and work (Cantekin 202; Knappert et al. 70; Çelik and İçduygu 258; Woods 9). In Lebanon living conditions are far worse. Syrians experience food, water and housing insecurity while living in informal tented settlements or other forms of sub-standard shelters under threat of eviction. They suffer from arbitrary curfews (Chatty

24), verbal and physical harassment (Alsharabati et al. 16), kidnapping by pro-Syrian Lebanese government militias (Fourn 5), and major bureaucratic and financial obstacles to registering new births (Yassin 52) or obtaining residency and work permits (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, „Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality“ 20), along with limited access to education (Yassin 81) and health services (Shamieh 65).

Syrian CSOs in Lebanon & Turkey

In 2010, some one thousand active Syrian CSOs were providing financial assistance and social services to 10 percent of the Syrian population (Al-Khoury et al. 4). Most of these were concentrated in urban centers providing mainly healthcare support, while financial support was a main activity in deprived rural areas. More than half of these CSOs were established from 2000 to 2010, stimulated by government policies to develop the sector (Al-Khoury et al. 5) alongside deregulatory market policies moving Syria in the direction of a Social Market Economy (World Bank, *The Toll of War* 4).

Developmental efforts in the sphere of civil society were led by the Syrian president's wife, Asma Al-Assad, who in 2001 established *The Syria Trust for Development* (The Trust), a local NGO

with development projects for Syrian youth, children, women and rural villages in governorates across Syria. At all levels, the majority of Trust employees were females. The Trust provided an attractive working environment for highly skilled migrant Syrians who had lived abroad and returned to Syria. Speaking from personal observation while working at the Trust as a research analyst from 2008 to 2011, much effort was put into developing the capabilities of employees through training and various learning opportunities. After 2011, there would be many Trust employees who would utilize these skills in other INGOs or in launching their own initiatives. A number of INGOs and UN agencies were operating in Syria before the conflict. According to Syrian law, INGOs require a local partner to execute projects in Syria. In this new phase of activity, INGO collaborations with Syrian CSOs including the Trust became more common, and according to Wael Sawah, author on Syrian civil society in an interview with Walker, Syrian CSOs became more diverse in their focus including environmental and cultural activities as well as those involving children and women.

Syrian CSOs underwent a second growth spurt after the outbreak of war in 2011. The numbers of new Syrian CSOs in the period 2011-2017 exceeded that which had

existed in Syria since 1959. Geographically, they spread to other Syrian cities and neighboring countries (Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad 6). Ranging from informal community-based organizations to professionalized NGOs that adopted Western NGO cultures, language and practices (Dixon et al. 112), these organizations initially focused on providing aid and humanitarian relief to meet refugee needs (Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad 6). Efforts gradually shifted toward development as the crisis continued, mirroring shifts in donor priorities. According to a 2017 mapping of Syrian CSO activity, around 40 percent were engaged in humanitarian aid and 50 percent in social and developmental activities (Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad 18). Additionally, interviewees often spoke of Syrian CSOs as safe spaces where Syrian communities in host countries can reestablish links with their community.

In 2018, Syrian women and children comprised 81 percent of registered refugees in Lebanon (Yassin 20) and 67 percent in Turkey (Cloeters et al. 22) and thus making them a main beneficiary for CSOs in these countries. In both Turkey and Lebanon, "relatively nascent" Syrian CSOs (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 8) find themselves working alongside more developed local and international organizations addressing a wide range of social issues

(Paker 10). Compared to the private sector, better employment conditions in CSOs in Lebanon and Turkey attract Syrians even when employment is informal (Fourn 8; Al-Zoua'bi and Iyad 6;).

In Lebanon, a common language has allowed a number of Syrian cultural CSOs to flourish, in addition to education and health services that are underprovided for Syrian refugees. Despite their supportive role, many INGOs in Lebanon are perceived as corrupt by Syrian refugees (Shamieh 66). Legal barriers prevent Syrians from being formally employed in CSOs (Fourn 10) or to register their own organizations. Yet Syrian CSOs do exist in Lebanon, operating informally within alternative structures such as non-profit private companies or functioning in an official capacity as Lebanese CSOs founded by Syrians who are also Lebanese passport holders. Turkey allows Syrians to register their CSOs (Dixon et al. 113) and to work in them. Relying on locally grounded approaches, the role of Turkish CSOs in facilitating integration and social cohesion grows as they work to counter the ethnic-based exclusionary nature of Turkish society by providing language courses and organizing events that bring both communities together (Paker 5; Cloeters et al. 26). However, cooperation between Syrian and Turkish CSOs remains limited due to

"hierarchical relationships, language barriers and cultural differences" (Mackreath and Sağnıç 3).

Influence of Gender as a Social Marker

The 1973 Syrian constitution calls for gender equality and removing obstacles that prevent Syrian women's advancement (Kelly and Breslin 1). Their economic participation was encouraged by the ruling Baath party policies (Abu-Assab 17), and the Syrian government's ninth five-year plan (2001-2005) was committed to increasing female participation in public life and decision-making by 30 percent (Kelly and Breslin 18). Still, in 2011 the female labor participation rate had dropped from 21 percent in 2001 to 12.9 percent in spite of improvements to women's educational enrollment at all levels and a growing economy. This figure, however, should be interpreted with caution since it fails to capture informal employment rates among women. The rate of labor-force participation for men over this period had also declined from 81 percent in 2001 to 72.2 percent in 2010, thus indicating a failure of the economy to absorb both male and female workers (SCPR 35). Although Syrian women were the first to gain voting rights in the Arab world in 1949 (Kamla 606), little improvement followed in their representation in parlia-

ment across time, increasing from 9.6 to 13.2 percent from 1997 to 2017.⁴ At higher governmental levels and in the judicial system, Syrian women have an even smaller presence (Kelly and Breslin 2) making it harder to enforce policies that promote gender inclusiveness. Syria has ratified the UN's *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) with reservations in 2003 (Kelly and Breslin 2), and in February 2019 the country passed amendments on over sixty articles from the *Personal Status Law* to improve women's rights.

In 2011, Syrian women displaced in Lebanon and Turkey found themselves once again in patriarchal environments (Kivilcim 202; Khatib 438). Gender violence in Turkey occurs at double the rates in Syria (Knappert et al. 64) while traditional gender roles limit the access of Turkish women to leadership positions (Ayca 454). An intersectional study on the exploitation of working Syrian women in Turkey finds that their refugee status and gender intersect, subjecting them to a "reinforced exculsion" caused by gender roles in both host and home countries (Knappert et al. 76). Despite this, Turkey's Kemalist legacy and non-discrimination principle in its Civil Code, which for example prohibits polygamous marriage and

requires the sharing of marital assets in divorce, allows women in Turkey to enjoy greater legal rights compared to women in Syria. A young Syrian woman living in Istanbul spoke of Turkish gender dynamics and their influence: "We were exposed to another society, a more open one, a girl's education is just like a boy's and the quality of education here is more advanced."⁵

Despite the presence of an active Lebanese civil society focusing on sexual harassment and women's rights (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 33; Khneisser 2), Syrian women in Lebanon suffer extensively from gender-based violence and exploitation, human trafficking and limited access to health care, thus affecting their health because of intersections in ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status (Shamieh 68; Yasmine and Moughalian 27).

Nevertheless, this study finds evidence of changing gender roles for Syrian women as triggered by the conflict and resulting displacement. Many of the Syrian women who were interviewed claimed to have experienced their first employment after 2011 in host countries so as to financially support themselves and their families and thus becoming breadwinners or household heads.⁶ The absence of a male household-head due to war is not the sole

driver of this phenomenon. Exploitation and informal employment conditions in both countries, as quoted in interviews, prevent males from alone meeting their family's financial needs as was the case in Syria.

Discriminatory employment practices are experienced by both Syrian men and women in host countries. However, many interviewed Syrian females, including top-management position holders, spoke of additional challenges in balancing work and home responsibilities. The domestic role of Syrian women as primary caretaker remains mostly unaltered. The result is a *double burden* exacerbated by poverty and a lack of social networks in host countries. As the following quotes demonstrate:

My husband doesn't mind if I work, but he wants everything perfect at home, children, doctors, schools, my husband doesn't participate, he wants everything.⁷

Another obstacle is having children. We need family, or a mother in law, nurseries are private, there are no public nurseries; you also need nurseries that are close to work. Turkish people rely on family to help them solve this problem. At three years old, you can put

them in a preschool that costs 700 TL a month; a typical salary is about 1600 TL.⁸

Some female respondents mentioned changes in gender roles regarding household duties such as receiving support from husbands in cooking or childcare. In Turkey, the double burden often prevents married Syrian women from enrolling in Turkish-language classes. Typically these women work from home, which increases their isolation, or they gain employment in low-skilled jobs that require less language skills.

Accommodating domestic gender roles and safety concerns drives Syrian women in host countries to seek opportunities in CSOs where better working conditions and hours exist. Some offer child-friendly spaces allowing mothers to accompany young children to work. Religious CSOs provide gender-segregated or female-dominated working spaces perceived as safer by husbands or parents because they are less likely to suffer sexual harassment or violence, making the transition from private to public spaces easier for women - as made clear by the following quote from a 21-year-old Syrian woman who works in a gender-segregated workspace at a Turkish CSO that allows her to accompany her infant to work: "This is a

child-friendly space, a space that is safe for women and children."⁹

Other studies have also documented similar double-burden challenges faced by Syrian women who began working after the crisis (El-Masri et al. 14; Abu-Assab 23). Civil society's focus on Syrian women and children creates a demand for female rather than male employees. In Turkey, interviewed CSO managers stated that Syrian female beneficiaries prefer to deal with female rather than male staff. Donor policies demanding female participation across organizational levels with funding preconditions further reinforces the employment of Syrian women in CSOs. Among CSOs that I visited in Lebanon and Turkey, female employees were the clear majority. Similarly, Fourn notes that in Syrian CSOs in Lebanon:

We did not observe blatant gender disparities in favor of men within any of the NGOs we studied. On the contrary, women are very well represented in leading positions, in stark contrast to most economic sectors. Some associations dedicated to women have almost only female staff (Fourn 11).

The growing presence of Syrian women at the workplace and the importance of their role as breadwinner in host countries after



Fig. 1: The Giant Worker. Source: Mohamad Khayata.

the war is also being reflected in contemporary Syrian art. One such example is the artwork above by Syrian artist Mohamad Khayata titled *The Giant Worker*. The exaggerated size of the Syrian female worker in the artwork is a reflection of their growing visibility and importance to their communities as they work to support themselves and their families.

Influences of Ethnicity/Nationality-Identity Social Markers

In Turkey, an "Arab" ethnic identity is grounds for discriminatory behavior against Syrians (Chatty 27). Turkey's "ethnic nationalism exclusively based on

Turkishness" (Aras and Köni 48) creates barriers for Syrian *Arabs* who are seen as culturally different, backward, dirty, poor, beggars, abusers of the welfare state and a threat to security and employment (Çelik and İçduygu 255; Chatty 27; Yavçan 168; Paker 5). The *guest* debate, grounded in religious duty or conditional charity instead of human rights, has been criticized for worsening the problem (Chatty 21; Yavçan 167; Semerci and Erdoğan 29) as demonstrated by the following quote:

While doing official procedures, if you just speak two words in Turkish they transform and respect you a lot. They really like Arabs who have learned Turkish, otherwise they are very clearly racist, they don't hide it.¹⁰

Syrians working in Turkish CSOs expressed hope that promotion and better pay would become possible once they received Turkish citizenship. They also expressed desires to found their own CSOs one day. In light of Turkey's current arbitrary and class-based citizenship policy (Şimşek 1), this desire to create and head an CSO can be also understood as a means of surpassing ethnic discrimination that prohibits them from accessing leadership positions within Turkish CSOs. For undocumented Syrians, involvement in

CSOs occurs only as informal employment, as the following quote demonstrates: "I am not an official employee here because I do not have official papers, so I'm not entitled to a raise in salary or a bonus."¹¹

In Lebanon a complicated political history with Syria and perceived competition over jobs, housing, health, and education services has resulted in official discriminatory policies and social responses against Syrian nationals that extend to civil society. Lebanese CSOs openly express a preference for recruiting Lebanese staff even when their beneficiaries are mostly Syrians, as demonstrated by the following quote from the founder of a Lebanese CSO providing services to Syrian refugees: "We have no Syrian employees; we want to empower the Lebanese community so they get benefits."¹²

Socioeconomic Class & Syrian CSO Elitism

Socioeconomic class¹³ influences the official status of Syrians in host countries and their participation in civil society. This is more clearly visible in Lebanon where Syrians with second passports and those who can afford legal assistance are able to overcome bureaucratic barriers and secure residency permits or register CSOs, while Syrians at the other end of the social spectrum live in dire conditions with few

rights and little hope of securing CSO employment opportunities. In Turkey, educated wealthy Syrians can afford to establish their own businesses and CSOs; they also face fewer difficulties in obtaining residencies and are priority candidates for Turkish citizenship.

The increasing *NGOization* of local CSOs reinforces socioeconomic differences that produce elitist leaderships in Syrian civil society. CSOs compete for funds from INGOs and Western governments to survive, making staff with foreign-language skills and NGO-related experience essential (Mackreath and Sağınç 62; Dixon et al. 99; Svoboda and Pantuliano 16). Generally speaking, within Syrian CSOs, findings confirm that the higher the educational degree the higher the position within the organization for both males and females. Educational attainment among Syrians, however, is influenced by urban/rural differences and gender. In 2010, 60 percent of the Syrian population held a primary-school degree or less. Women were 2.5 times more likely to be illiterate than men, with rural illiteracy occurring at twice the rate of urban areas (SCPR 34). Syrian women from rural areas are therefore less likely to have postgraduate degrees than their urban counterparts, and because civil-society organizations in Syria are concentrated in urban areas, namely

Damascus followed by Aleppo and Lattakia (Al-Khoury et al. 5), they are also less likely to have had the opportunity to accumulate NGO-specific experience.

The influence of socioeconomic status on education and the accumulation of NGO skills is more evident in Lebanon. Prominent female Syrian leaders often have wealthy urban backgrounds and higher educational degrees from Western universities in development-related subjects such as *Gender Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies*. Fourn confirms this educated urban middle-class characteristic among Syrians engaged in civil-society work in Lebanon (4).

The language barrier in Turkey alters this dynamic by creating demand for Syrians fluent in Turkish and Arabic in Turkish CSOs. Management in these CSOs relies heavily on Syrian interpreters, teachers and psychologists in projects with Syrian beneficiaries. This creates opportunities for young unskilled Syrians who took advantage of free language courses and learned Turkish to accumulate CSO work experience, attend training sessions, support their livelihood and finance further education. Several Syrian women who were so engaged did express hopes of establishing their own CSOs in the future. For Syrian CSOs in Turkey, access to alternative funding from Arab countries allows

them to bypass the complications involved in Western donations. With each year, they also develop their CSO structures and skills further. This is more challenging for young Syrians in Lebanon where access to higher education is restricted by legal issues, academic qualifications, and affordability (Yassin 82).

Conclusion

This paper finds that the ongoing Syrian conflict and displacement have created conditions resulting in a greater presence of Syrian women in the public space as workers and members of civil society in Turkey and Lebanon. International, host and Syrian CSOs are key sites for this increased participation. This phenomenon is influenced by a number of external factors including the existence of better working conditions for women in CSOs compared to the private sector, higher demand in CSOs for female rather than male employees, international donor policies that support female participation, and opportunities for capacity development within these organizations that allow unskilled Syrian women to gain experience and further advance within the sector. The ongoing Syrian conflict and consequential growth of civil society has been a catalyst for change in Syrian women's traditional gender roles. This change is

slowly finding its way into the domestic sphere of Syrian families, but traditional gender roles persist in the majority of households and place a greater burden on women who struggle to manage both work and home duties. For Syrian women with children, involvement in civil society and the public sphere is even more challenging.

For Syrian women in Turkey and Lebanon, this paper reveals that their socioeconomic status and ethnicity/nationality intersect with gender to influence their ability to participate in civil society. It also demonstrates how gender studies focusing solely on gender as the primary cause for discrimination against women can result in over-simplistic interpretations that fail to adequately capture other key sources of discrimination such as the situations highlighted above where socioeconomic status and ethnic identity play a bigger role in determining participation than gender.

The negative effects of these social markers are stronger in Lebanon as compared to Turkey, which allows Syrian women to work in and establish CSOs. Ethnic identity mainly prevents Syrian women from occupying leadership positions in Turkish CSOs. In Lebanon, discriminatory policies and social practices greatly hinder the participation of Syrian women along socio-

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economic lines and those of national identity.

It is unclear whether Syrian women can use their increasing presence within civil society to advocate collectively for greater gender equality and participation in all public spaces within host countries and in Syria. Evidence from my interviews shows that a strongly unified and representative feminist agenda in Syrian civil society has yet to materialize - as might be expected from a civil society that currently places a priority on dealing with the humanitarian impact of conflict rather than advocating greater rights for women (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 12). Further research is needed to examine the progress of Syrian civil organizations and the role of Syrian women within them as they advance their skills and capabilities.

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Notes

¹ Contact UNDP Syria for obtaining a copy of the report.

² Gender here is understood in the socially constructed and dynamic sense, influenced by current evolving political and post-Arab Spring events.

³ Decree No. 29/1 dated 15/02/2018 Ministry of Labour, Lebanon, see www.labor.gov.lb/Temp/Files/74a11682-051a-4d83-a8fe-905a54b3968f.pdf. Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

⁴ Figures taken from UNDP estimates for Syria, see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/31706>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2020.

⁵ Personal Interview. In-person meeting. 27 Oct. 2018.

⁶ In 2018 there were 18 percent of Syrian households which were Female-headed (Yassin 41).

⁷ Group Interview. In-person meeting. 18 Sept. 2018.

⁸ Personal Interview. In-person meeting. 19 Oct. 2018.

⁹ Group Interview. In-person meeting. 19 Sept. 2018.

¹⁰ Personal Interview. In-person meeting. 26 Oct. 2018.

¹¹ Personal Interview. In-person meeting. 18 Sept. 2018.

¹² Personal Interview. In-person meeting. 6 Nov. 2018.

¹³ Understood here in relation to urban/rural dichotomies and relative poverty preventing access to education.

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