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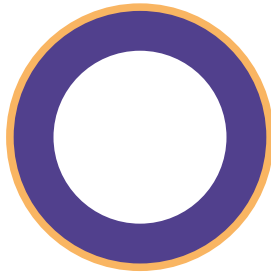
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# Violence Against Women and Girls in Syria

- Laws
- Knowledge
- Awareness
- Attitudes

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SYRIA:  
LAWS, KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS, ATTITUDES



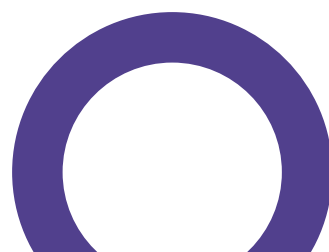
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>General context of VAWG in Syria .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1	Sample size and design .....	16
4.2	Questionnaire .....	18
4.3	Qualitative interview grid .....	18
4.4	Ethical considerations of the survey .....	19
<b>5.</b>	<b>Implementation of data collection – field work: .....</b>	<b>20</b>
5.1	Data collection management .....	20
5.2	Training of data collectors .....	20
5.3	Data tool test .....	20
5.4	Data entry & analysis .....	21
<b>6.</b>	<b>Research findings .....</b>	<b>22</b>
6.1	Quantitative findings .....	22
6.1.1	Awareness of VAWG.....	22
6.1.2	Beliefs and opinions on VAWG.....	30
6.1.3	Personal experiences of VAWG.....	40
6.2	Qualitative findings.....	49
6.2.1	Defintion of VAWG and discrimination against women.....	49
6.2.2	VAWG prevalence and its link with the armed conflict in Syria.....	53
6.2.3	National laws and international agreements on women's rights.....	60
6.2.4	Services provided for women victims of VAWG.....	63
6.2.5	Women's economic participation.....	65
6.2.6	Women's participation in leadership positions.....	69
6.2.7	Media and awareness-raising activities.....	72
<b>7.</b>	<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>75</b>
	<b>References .....</b>	<b>80</b>
	<b>Annexes.....</b>	<b>82</b>
	Annex 1: Sampling frame & scoring methodology .....	83
	Annex 2: Questionnaire .....	87
	Annex 3: Interview guide .....	92





## Acronyms

<b>CBOs</b>	Community Based Organisations
<b>CBS</b>	Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CRSV</b>	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>EFI</b>	EuroMed Feminist Initiative
<b>FPU</b>	Family Protection Unit
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>GII</b>	Gender -Inequality Index
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>FIDH</b>	International Federation for Human Rights
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>MSAL</b>	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
<b>SCD</b>	Syrian Commission for Development
<b>SCFPA</b>	Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>SNHR</b>	Syrian Network for Human Rights
<b>UNOCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>UNSCR 1325</b>	United Nation's Security Council Resolution 1325
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>WoS</b>	Whole of Syria Network
<b>WPSA</b>	Women, Peace, and Security Agenda





# Introduction

**EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI)** is a policy platform that provides expertise in the field of equality between women and men and advocates for women's human rights as inseparable from democracy building and citizenship, for political solutions to all conflicts, and for the right of peoples to self-determination. In 2019, the Regional Observatory on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) was established as an independent mechanism to contribute to ending VAWG, to the inclusion of women's rights in policy debates, and to the social acknowledgement of women as actors of sustaining peace and security. The Observatory is hosted by the EFI office in Amman.

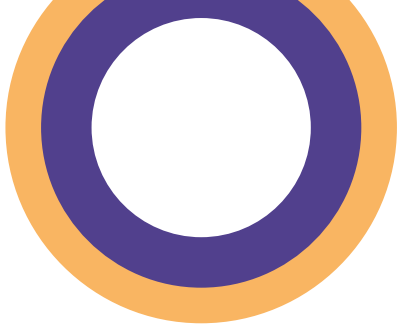
The Common Agenda for Combating VAWG<sup>(1)</sup> as a main barrier to women's participation in decision-making and peace-building processes in Syria<sup>1</sup> was developed with the involvement of over 250 Syrian activists, gender and legal experts and local community members from different geographical areas inside and outside Syria. The Common Agenda highlighted the gender aspects related to key protection issues in Syria such as arbitrary arrests and detention, forced disappearances and conscription, civil documentation, housing, land and property rights, and leaving women and girls exposed to significant and specific risks. The ongoing insecurity, a deepening economic crisis, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated women and girls' exposure to violence, especially domestic violence and marital rape. Such violence causes severe physical and mental health consequences, including unwanted pregnancies, permanent disabilities, and increased levels of psychological distress, which can sometimes result in suicide.

This study for assessing VAWG in Syria was conducted by EFI and the Regional Observatory on VAWG within the framework of the project "Implementing the Common Agenda to Combat VAWG and Promote Inclusive Peace Building Processes in Syria," funded by the European Union (EU). The project aims to contribute to inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making in Syria, through combating VAWG and improving women's participation in local and international decision-making.

The study is dedicated to measuring VAWG in Syria and shedding light on the state of policies and services aimed at combating it. It provides a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the VAWG situation in Syria. The complicated political and administrative situation of Syria, which involves the division of the country into three distinct regions, prompted the authors to expand the report and analysis to encompass the different political, legal, and social dimensions of VAWG in the country.

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**(1)** Common Agenda – Combating Violence Against Women and Girls as a main barrier to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding processes in Syria, EFI, 2021, at <https://www.efi-ife.org/en/>



## 2 - GENERAL CONTEXT OF VAWG IN SYRIA

Women in Syria experience VAWG commonly and suffer from violations and discrimination in law and practice. Like the situation in most countries in the Southern Mediterranean, the protection mechanisms and measures are not sufficient to stop discrimination and improve the situation for women. They are exposed to different forms of VAWG including but not limited to “honour crimes,” sexual harassment, child marriage, and rape. Moreover, the protracted armed conflict has aggravated VAWG in terms of prevalence, frequency and severity and new forms have emerged, namely, Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV).

The situation of women and girls in Syria has been affected by the armed conflict since the outbreak of Syria’s popular uprising in 2011 that escalated into a civil war<sup>(2)</sup>. Several international and national reports confirmed the increased levels of sexual violence against women and girls. Reports from EFI, Syrian partner organisations, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) revealed that most allegations of rape and other forms of CRSV have been committed by military forces and militias at checkpoints and in detention centres. Some victims were raped and killed without the rapists being held accountable. Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the use of sexual violence by the Syrian Government forces to torture detained women. Human trafficking is also common, mostly in the form of child marriage occurring in refugee camps<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reports have revealed that at least 10,628 women remain arrested/detained or forcibly disappeared since the inception of the war in March 2011, at the hands of various parties in the Syrian conflict and controlling forces. SNHR also documented the deaths of 28,628 females from March 2011 to November 2021<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(2) Phillips, C., The Battle for Syria. International Rivalry in the New Middle East, Syria’s Civil War Government Victory or Frozen Conflict, 2018.

(3) Violations against Women in Syria and the Disproportionate Impact of the Conflict on them, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2016.

(4) Tenth annual report on violations against females in Syria, Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 2021, at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/international-day-elimination-violence-against-women-tenth-annual-report>

Reports from EFI, Syrian organisations, and international organisations have also noted the prevalence of sexual violence, forced marriage, and domestic violence in the country<sup>(5)</sup>. Domestic violence represents one of the most common VAWG forms in Syria. A statistical study conducted by the Police Directorate of Aleppo revealed that the number of domestic violence cases received in Aleppo for the years of 2017 and 2018 amounted to 280 assault cases. Out of these cases, 185 involved assaults on women by their husbands. However, these are only the cases reported to the police; the unreported cases are likely much higher.

Meanwhile, EFI's report on Gender-Sensitive Transitional Justice Process in Syria<sup>(6)</sup> indicated that there is a gap in documenting interlinked and complex VAWG cases, including political, social, sexual, legal, and economic violence, which have had a negative impact on women. The report revealed the need to go beyond solely focusing on sexual violence against women in detention centres and to also consider other forms of violence that women encounter such as political, social, economic, and legal violence.

In terms of women's participation in decision-making, the proportion of seats held by women in the Parliament is 11%, and the proportion of female ministers is 10%. Female labour force participation rate in Syria was only 16% in 2021, according to the last updated data issued by the World Bank<sup>(7)</sup>.

Syria was ranked 130 out of 163 countries in terms of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2023<sup>(8)</sup>. The country's score is 58.18 points which is below the regional score average of 66.4%. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), Syria's value for 2021 was 0.577 points, which was below the world average in 2021, at 0.721 points<sup>(9)</sup>. The country was ranked 119 out of 191 countries in the 2021 Gender Inequality Index (GII), with a value of 47.7%<sup>(10)</sup>.

According to a press release issued by the IRC in 2021, Syria is considered one of the five most challenging places in the world to grow up in as a girl. Instability and upheaval have contributed to increased rates of child marriage, adolescent birth, illiteracy, and gender-based violence that put the lives and futures of girls in peril<sup>(11)</sup>.

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(5) Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. SYRIA RESPONSE CONSULTATIONS ON THE UK NATIONAL ACTION PLAN on Women, Peace and Security, 2017.

(6) Gender-Sensitive Transitional Justice Process in Syria, EuroMed Feminist Initiative, 2019.

(7) World Bank Website, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=SY>.

(8) Sustainable Development Report, at <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/syrian-arab-republic>.

(9) Human Development report, UNDP, 2021/2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/>.

(10) Gender Inequality Index, UNDP, 2021, at: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#indices/GII>

(11) IRC press release at: <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/five-most-challenging-places-grow-girl-to-day-0>





## Legislative framework

Syria ratified the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) but still maintains reservations to several articles. These include Article 9, concerning the granting of children the nationality of their mother; Article 15 concerning the freedom of movement and choice of domicile and residence; and Article 16, specifically paragraphs (c, d, f and g), which pertain to the equality of rights and duties between spouses during marriage and upon its dissolution with regard to guardianship, kinship, maintenance and adoption, as well as the legal effect of the betrothal and marriage of a child. Syria cited incompatibility with provisions of Islamic law (Sharia) as the reason for these reservations. Additionally, Syria maintained reservations to Article 29 which concerns arbitration between countries in the event of a dispute between them. It was only in 2017 that Syria lifted reservations to Article 2 of CEDAW.

The Syrian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex as Article 33 of the 2012 Constitution states that “citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.” Furthermore, Article 23 states that the “state shall provide women with all opportunities enabling them to effectively and fully contribute to the political, economic, social and cultural life, and the state shall work on removing the restrictions that prevent their development and participation in building society.”<sup>(12)</sup>

On the other hand, the Constitution does not acknowledge commitments to international treaties. Questions on the effectiveness of these principles in the Constitution and the extent of their practical application have arisen. For example, although the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex, the Nationality Law does not grant women the right to pass on nationality to their husbands or children.

Despite the progress made in terms of ratification of international agreements on women’s rights, the harmonisation of national laws with them is still lacking. There are still legal provisions that perpetuate discrimination against women and do not provide sufficient prevention and protection from violence against women.

The Personal Status Law, No. 59 of 1953 regulates marriage, family relations, engagement, divorce, and inheritance. The Law is based on the provisions of Islamic law, but some matters related to Christians, Jewish and Druze communities are exempted from its application. The Law still contains discriminatory provisions with respect to the legal age of marriage, custodianship on children, marriage consent, and equality in divorce.<sup>(13)</sup>

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<sup>(12)</sup> The Syrian Constitution of 2012, Adopted by referendum on February 27, 2012.

<sup>(13)</sup> Situation report on the discrimination against women in Syria, EuroMed Rights, 2017, at: [https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Factsheet\\_VAW\\_Syria\\_EN\\_Nov2017.pdf](https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Factsheet_VAW_Syria_EN_Nov2017.pdf)

If a woman wants to marry, the judge is required to ask her guardian to give his opinion on the marriage within 15 days. If the guardian does not object to the marriage, the judge shall authorise her marriage, subject to the condition of competence and dowry.

The minimum age of marriage varies among religious denominations. Although most religious groups set the minimum age at 18, all religious groups allow girls under the age of 18 to marry<sup>(14)</sup>. The Personal Status Laws sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for boys and girls. Nonetheless, Article 18 of the same law gives the judge a discretionary power to authorise the marriage of a child aged 15 years or over under certain conditions<sup>(15)</sup>.

There is no law on domestic violence and marital rape is not criminalised. However, rape, other than that of a spouse, is criminalised under Article 489 of the Penal Code. The death penalty applies to rape if the victim is under 15 years. At the same time, the perpetrator of rape can receive a reduced penalty if he marries the victim according to Article 508 of the Penal Code. A minimum penalty of two years imprisonment applies for rape in cases of marriage<sup>(16)</sup>.

The Penal Code prohibits abortion including in cases of rape. This puts women who became pregnant as a result of rape in a catastrophic situation.

Article 513 of the Penal Code prohibits prostitution and criminalises the perpetrator with only six months imprisonment, but it does not ensure protection of women in prostitution and does not penalise the clients who perpetrate this crime.

Last but not least, the lack of sufficient laws and protection systems leads to deliberate use of CRSV by all parties. Many challenges prevent CRSV cases from being properly addressed and documented, including underreporting due to stigmatisation and intimidation of survivors<sup>(17)</sup>.

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**(14)** Personal Status laws provide exceptions for allowing the marriage of minors (Article 18 of the Syrian Personal Status Law, Article 13 of the Greek Orthodox Personal Status Law, Article 4 of the Syriac Orthodox Personal Status Law, Article 15 of the Orthodox Security Sect Personal Status Law, Article 24 of the Personal Status Law for the evangelical community.

**(15)** Gender Justice & the Law report for Syria, UN Women, 2019, at: <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-justice-law-syria>

**(16)** See the Syrian Penal Code, No. 148/1949, at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/national-practice/law-no-1481949-syrian-penal-code-1949>.

**(17)** Gender-Sensitive Transitional Justice Process in Syria, IBID.

## Services for women victims of VAWG



EFI and Syria Gender Advocacy Group issued a statement during the side-event at the 2022 Brussels Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, alerting the international community about the limited number and availability of services for victims of VAWG<sup>(18)</sup> and urging decision-makers to ensure the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPSA) in Syria. They called for urgent provision of political and financial dedicated means to enhance the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of services for victims of VAWG in Syria and host countries, including:

- Shelter/homes for emergency and longer-term protection for women, girls who are victims of violence, and their children.
- Emergency toll-free numbers available 24/7 and mobile applications for all regions in Syria.
- Psychosocial support, VAWG case management, health and mental health services, and free legal aid and counselling.

The World Bank report of 2019 revealed that the lack of health services for victims of sexual violence and gender-based violence exacerbates the situation of victims of sexual violence. The report revealed that the overwhelming majority of those surveyed (70%) across the country agree that there is a lack of clinical care for rape survivors<sup>(19)</sup>.

Regarding justice, many women activists report that even women who might be willing to speak publicly about VAWG might not know how to pursue legal remedies, first because the laws and the constitution do not support women seeking justice for such acts and second because of the lack of resources and legal aid<sup>(20)</sup>.

There is no specific directorate under the police for dealing with VAWG or domestic violence. However, the Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs (SCFPA) opened the Family Protection Unit (FPU) in 2017 with the aim of addressing cases of violence against women and children by protecting women and children, as well as providing psychological, social and legal support. A hotline (9461) was also established by SCFPA for receiving complaints on VAWG.

However, many factors still impede women from reporting violence, among them, lack of legal protection for victims, as well as lack of

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(18) Euro Med Feminist Initiative (EFI) Side-event to Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region 2022, final statement, at: <https://shorturl.at/efyQ8>

(19) World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians, February 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>

(20) UN Women, at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/11/take-five-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-syria>

economic independence coupled with the major factors that stop wives from filing complaints against their husbands.

Moreover, two factors have emerged during the war that have affected the lives of Syrian women and the circumstances of VAWG. These factors include:

- Displacement: Displacement forces Syrian women to lose their family protection, their position in their community, their feeling of safety and their supported network. Being outside the context they used to live in and outside the protection circle of their relatives, friends, and family members can emphasise the need for legal and governmental protection.
- The economic situation: The economic factors during the war redefined the lifestyle of Syrian women and changed their gender role on several levels. According to the international reports and academic papers, in wartime, men are more involved in the frontlines, potentially leading to casualties or displacement. In Syria in particular, the conflict has resulted into a growth of female heads of households, including widows and wives of the hundreds of thousands killed, disappeared or missing. Female-headed households are twice as likely to report a complete inability to meet basic needs in comparison with male-headed households<sup>(21)</sup>.

Men who own large or medium tracts of farmland seek to reduce the magnitude of agricultural costs by finding or hiring cheap or free labour. One way they achieve this is by marrying more than one wife or in some cases delaying the marriage of sisters or daughters. This is common in North-East Syria, for example. Women with such living conditions suffer from economic violence because they work both inside and outside the home without compensation or control on earnings. In the whole of Syria, it is rare for a woman to receive her inheritance.

As a common social practice, inheritance must remain in the hands of the brother, which discourages women from demanding and or asking for it. In the event that she expresses her wish to take her share of the inheritance, even if it is half of the man's share as stipulated in the Islamic Sharia and Syrian law, she will be socially rejected and considered to be outside the customs and morals. This economic violence is mirrored in other forms of violence, such as in a woman's access to healthcare<sup>(22)</sup>, where her ability to visit a doctor is often subject to her husband's assessment of the extent of her need for medical attention. This supports the economic power dynamics of men, which are not limited to the agricultural regions, but exist in all regions of Syria.

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(21) Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Gendered Impact of the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Women and Girls, at <https://rb.gy/wcfjpu>

(22) Fawole, O. I. (2008). Economic Violence To Women and Girls: Is It Receiving the Necessary Attention? Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 9(3), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838008319255>





### 3 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women in Syria suffer from violations and discrimination in law and practice and experience VAWG commonly. The existing protection mechanisms and measures are not sufficient to stop discrimination and improve the situation for women.

The armed conflict has further aggravated the situation of VAWG in the country as women and girls have been affected by the conflict itself and conflict-related forms of VAWG since the outbreak of Syria's popular uprising.

In order to tackle the VAWG problem in Syria and provide insights into policies and services pertaining to VAWG, this study assessment aims to analyse the international and national frameworks for combating VAWG in Syria, and to investigate women's awareness as well as their experiences and behaviours towards VAWG. Furthermore, "the Common Agenda for Combating VAWG as a Major Barrier to Women's Participation"<sup>(23)</sup> in Syria highlighted gender-related aspects of key protection issues in Syria such as arbitrary arrests and detention, forced disappearances, and leaving women and girls exposed to significant and specific risks. Despite the attention given to VAWG, research on its prevalence in Syria has been limited. Therefore, this research aimed to provide comprehensive data and information on VAWG in Syria.

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Through the quantitative approach, the survey measured:

- Awareness of VAWG.
- Knowledge and opinions towards legislation and services provided for women victims.
- Perceptions and attitudes towards VAWG.
- Women's experiences of VAWG.

The sample of the research covered all major areas in Syria: North-East Syria, North-West Syria, and areas controlled by the Government of Syria (GoS). In each region, 403 women were surveyed, resulting in a total of 1,209 questionnaires across all sampled governorates. The field data collection was carried out between July and August 2023.

In the qualitative approach, knowledge and perceptions on international agreements, national laws and existing services related to VAWG were

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**(23)** Euro Med Feminist Initiative, the Common Agenda for Combating Violence against Women and Girls as a major barrier to women's participation in Syria, at <https://south.euneighbours.eu/publication/common-agenda-combating-violence-against-women-and-girls-major/>

assessed through in-depth interviews with privileged observers. The study targeted 11 persons identified as “privileged observers,” which included women and men from women’s and human rights organisations and networks, institutions, academics, researchers and media. Furthermore, opinions of observers on the respective roles of government and civil society in preventing and combating VAWG were examined by the research.

The study revealed the following main results:

### **Regarding awareness of VAWG**

- There is lack of knowledge about the services provided to women victims of VAWG, including services provided by government/authorities and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), as well as the existence of a hotline and a dedicated governmental directorate for dealing with VAWG. The percentage of those who lacked knowledge of the existence of government/authority institutions addressing VAWG reached 73%. The same general trend was observed in the knowledge related to the existence of civil society institutions addressing VAWG (68% did not have such awareness). Also, 73% of respondents had no knowledge of the existence of a specific governmental directorate for the protection of families in Syria, and 88% reported no knowledge of a hotline for reporting cases of VAWG. Additionally, 89% stated that neither the government nor CSOs provide shelters for women victims of VAWG.
- Experts indicated that VAWG is on the rise in Syria, especially as a result of war. This was confirmed by the findings of the study, as all the types of VAWG have increased during the war according to 69% of the survey participants. The most frequently reported types include: physical assault (74%), psychological assault (63%), verbal violence (61%) and early marriage (60%). Cyber violence (31%) was the least reported type.

### **Regarding opinion towards laws for combating VAWG.**

- Experts indicated that the Syrian Constitution does not acknowledge commitments to internationally ratified agreements and conventions and does not include the right to protection from violence against women. Moreover, the principles of the Constitution and the ratified international agreements are not integrated into national legislation. For example, although the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex, the Nationality Law does not grant women the right to pass on nationality to their husbands or children.
- Experts pointed out that the Syrian Personal Status Laws do not protect the rights of women, but actually contribute to violating these rights as they consecrate the concept of male guardianship.

- According to the experts, the Penal Code violates the rights of women as it mitigates the sentence if the rapist marries the victim and provides for commuted sentences in case of “honour crimes”. Discriminatory legal provisions also exist in the Labour Law, the Social Insurance Law, the Agricultural Relations Law, the Nationality Law, the Anti-Prostitution Law, and the Anti-Human Trafficking Law. This was confirmed by the statistical analysis which showed that the majority of the respondents (61%) believed that the laws and procedures for the protection of women from violence are not adequate.

## **Regarding beliefs and opinions towards VAWG**

- Of the respondents, 68% were against decriminalising rape in situations related to women’s clothing or behaviour.

- Of the respondents, 80% believed that women who are victims of violence by their husbands or family accept to stay with them because of their lack of financial resources.

- According to experts, service provision centres and shelters are insufficient and mostly located in Damascus, making it difficult for women victims in other governorates to access them. CSOs do not have enough funds to provide protection for women, and the government cooperates exclusively with licensed CSOs. Experts also indicated that shelters and social services lack trained staff on dealing with cases of women victims of VAWG and the victim-centered approach. In this regard, a low percentage of participants in the survey agreed that it is easy for women to access the police (24%), health care (37%), legal services (23%), and protection/assistance services (23%).

- Experts pointed out that the war in Syria increased the economic participation of women. However, this increase has been accompanied by insufficient laws and measures for protecting women, leading to women becoming vulnerable to various forms of VAWG, including physical blackmail, wage disparities, sexual harassment, and exploitation in the workplace.

- Trafficking of women and girls and sexual exploitation existed before the war, but it became a widespread phenomenon with the start of the war. Most experts indicated that displaced women are the most vulnerable group as a result of the war as they become more at risk of harassment, blackmail, and forced marriage especially with the widespread patriarchal mentality.

- Experts explained that VAWG in the form of deprivation of education and work is common in certain areas, such as North-East Syria, while it is less common in Damascus and Salamiyah or As-Suwayda.

- According to experts, there is lack of coordination between the government, CSOs, and international NGOs working in Syria to receive and

refer cases of women victims. Also, a lack of coordination exists between different authorities regarding civil records on marriage and divorce.

- Experts confirmed that the media includes insults directed towards women and conveys many messages that promote VAWG and negative social norms. Gender-based stereotypes and prejudices exist in both media and educational curricular. In addition, there is lack of campaigns for challenging these stereotypes raising awareness of all forms of VAWG.

### **Regarding personal experiences of VAWG**

- The rates of women experiencing VAWG at least once in the previous 12 months were as follows: insult in public (48%), forced sexual contact/act (16%), sexual intercourse (6%).
- Regarding domestic violence, in the last 12 months, 28% of women experienced physical abuse and 11% of women experienced death threats in the last 12 months.
- Related to barriers hindering women from reporting violence,

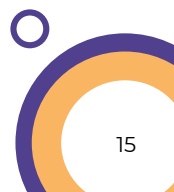
respondents mostly selected “shame” (72%), “rejection or being ostracised by family and friends” (71%), and “fear of consequences and the threat of perpetrator” (70%).

### **Challenges and limitations**

Regarding technical challenges faced in questionnaires on VAWG and women’s rights, participants might have chosen their response based on what they considered to be socially acceptable behaviour instead of providing honest answers. For this reason, the data collectors provided the participants with a comfortable atmosphere that ensured confidentiality. Also, participants were not asked to mention their names in the questionnaire form.

Due to the security issues in Syria, it was difficult for the data collectors to move freely between areas to administer the questionnaire. However, the management of the data collection process adapted to the situation properly. Eleven data collectors were selected, with each collector residing in the same area targeted by the questionnaire; therefore, they knew how and where to go.

As a limitation to this study, conducting in-depth interviews with governmental officials was not possible due to the complex political and administrative situation in Syria. The research team found it was not possible to get approvals from government institutions to participate in the interviews.







## 4 - METHODOLOGY

The methodology included collection and analysis of primary data using combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. As a first stage, the methodology involved thorough review and analysis of secondary data and information, the identification of key analysis and research questions and the development of relevant tools for data collection.

A population-based survey was carried out to provide a basic overview and relevant quantitative data to measure women's awareness, attitudes, and personal experiences regarding VAWG. Through the qualitative approach, knowledge and perceptions on international agreements, national laws and existing services related to VAWG were assessed through in-depth interviews with "privileged observers." The research was conducted through the following concrete phases:

- The first phase entailed conducting a desk review, meeting with the EFI team, developing the methodology, including the sampling strategy, and preparing preliminarily for the field work.
- The second phase included the data collection process, which consisted of training data collectors, conducting in-depth interviews, and administering the survey.
- The third phase comprised the analysis and reporting of both quantitative and qualitative results to develop the VAWG assessment report, highlighting the key findings.

### 4.1 SAMPLE SIZE AND DESIGN

The sample size of the survey was determined by a technique that is widely used to determine sample sizes for populations equal to or above 100,000.

The following sampling equation was applied in each region (South, North-West, and North-East).

Equation:  $n = \frac{(Z^2 P q)}{d^2}$ , Where:

**N:** Refers to the required sample size when the entire survey population is greater than 100,000.

**Z:** The standard normal deviate is usually set at 1.96, which corresponds to the 95% level of confidence.

**P:** 50% is normally used.

**Q:** 1-p

**D:** Degree of accuracy desired; in this context set at 0.05.

Substituting the values into the equation:

$$n = \frac{1.96 \times 1.96 \times 0.5(1.0 - 0.5)}{0.05 \times 0.05} = 384$$

The sample size of 384 respondents was obtained by substituting the values into the formula above. This number was increased by 5% to 403 respondents to account for non-responses and to reduce the margin of error. The sample of 403 women was reached in each region. Thus, a total number of 1209 questionnaires were filled in the sampled governorates. Sampling was done through two-stage stratified sampling. Primary sampling units were determined based on the population size of regions and then within each governorate to ensure representation across all areas in Syria, as follows:

- North-East Syria: Al-Hasakah, Qamishli, Deir ez-Zor.
- North-West Syria: Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia.
- South Syria: Damascus, As-Suwayda, Daraa.

Out of the 14 governorates in Syria, 10 were selected to cover the three regions mentioned above.

Due to the absence of a national census in Syria or recent trusted statistics on the population, the questionnaires were distributed equally in each governorate.

The last census conducted in Syria was in 2004. The Syrian government was supposed to conduct an official census in 2014 but it was cancelled due to the security situation in the country.

One exception was made for Damascus where 200 more questionnaires were allocated, due to the larger population in the capital linked to the number of people who moved there as it was safer than other governorates, especially the southern governorates of Syria like Daraa and As-Suwayda. The latest obtainable official figures released by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimated the population of Damascus to be 2,103,405 as of 2021, while the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated it to be 1,828,845<sup>(24)</sup>.

The security situation in Syria was taken into account, including the areas under the control of the Regime and other forces. The age criteria of the women participants to the quantitative phase covered four categories: 18-25, 26-40, 41-60, and above 60 years old.

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**(24)** Syria: Socio Economic Situation in in the Damascus City, European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022, at: [https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/2022\\_09\\_COI\\_Report\\_Syria\\_Socio-economic\\_Situation\\_Damascus\\_city\\_EN.pdf](https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/2022_09_COI_Report_Syria_Socio-economic_Situation_Damascus_city_EN.pdf)

## 4.2 QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was designed to gather information on women's perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes towards VAWG and the access to services. The questions were worded to include Yes/No questions, multiple choice questions, and open-ended questions. The first section included general information such as age group, education, place of residence and nationality. The next sections of the questionnaire consisted of a set of multiple-choice questions designed to assess women's awareness, opinions, attitudes and experiences of VAWG. The last section was devoted to open-ended questions. (Please see Annex 2 for the questionnaire form.)

## 4.3 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GRID

The qualitative research was implemented through in-depth interviews. These interviews were carried out with a carefully selected sample that ensured both diversity of the participants and relevance to the purpose of the survey. The research team identified 11 persons as privileged observers from CSOs, networks, academics, research institutions and media. It was not possible to interview relevant officials from ministries and governmental institutions due to political and administrative constraints.

The questions of the interview grid covered the following areas:

- Main causes and results of discrimination and VAWG.
- Consequences of the protracted armed conflict on all forms of VAWG and legal protection.
- Perceptions on effectiveness of national laws and public policies.
- Perceptions on women's participation in economic life and political life.
- Opinions on the role of the government and CSOs for preventing and combating VAWG.
- Opinions on prior action needed to address main forms of VAWG and discrimination.

For the guiding questions of the in-depth interviews, please see Annex 3.

## 4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE SURVEY

Due to the sensitivity of the subject under study, the survey was carried out in a manner guaranteeing total confidentiality of the people surveyed. The study ensured that all individuals participating in the survey were aware of the objectives and content and that the information they provided was based on their explicit consent.

As for the in-depth interviews, the participants were assured about the confidentiality of the data collection process before each interview. To maintain the integrity of the data, sessions were audio-recorded if participants did not object to it; otherwise, only written notes were taken.

The research team abided by the European Privacy Regulations. These include mainly the following:

- The need for an individual's clear consent to the processing of his or her personal data.
- Easier access for the data subject to his or her personal data.
- The right to rectification, to erasure and "to be forgotten."
- The right to object, including to the use of personal data for the purposes of "profiling."



## **5 - IMPLEMENTATION OF DATA COLLECTION – FIELD WORK:**

### **5.1 DATA COLLECTION MANAGEMENT**

The data collection took place between May and June, 2023. One national researcher was assigned to conduct the in-depth interviews. Regarding the survey, a total of 11 data collectors were hired, taking into consideration their experience and skill in data collection, as well as their availability for the survey.

The field data collection team was chosen from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), volunteers and new graduates. One of the roles of the national researcher was to set up and manage a team, oversee data collection and ensure coordination and communication with the international researcher.

In parallel, in-depth interviews were conducted during the same period.

The national researcher carried out the interviews, adhering to the following:

- Data collection protocols.
- Training on how to use the qualitative tool.
- Procedures for properly completing and using informed consent forms.
- Reporting and transcription procedures.

### **5.2 TRAINING OF DATA COLLECTORS**

The data collectors received an online training delivered by the data analyst, the researcher consultant and the national researcher on data collection methods, including the code of ethics for self-administrated questionnaires.

The training covered the following themes:

- Questionnaire content and overview of gender and VAWG in Syria.
- How to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for women respondents.
- Code of ethics for data collection.
- Safeguarding policies and practices during data collection.

### **5.3 DATA TOOL TEST**

The questionnaire was administered to some participants to measure the time needed, to make sure that the questions were well-understood and to correct any existing deficiencies.

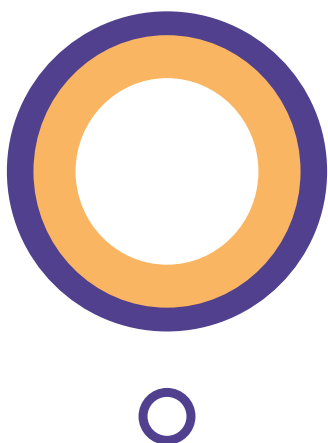
Pre-testing of in-depth interview questions was conducted through a small-scale simulation of the interviews to address any gaps or ambiguities in the questions.

Accordingly, two interviews were conducted to assess the participants' understanding of the questions, the flow and coherence of the interview guide, and the clarity and adequacy of the questions. The time planned for each interview was assessed as well.

## **5.4 DATA ENTRY & ANALYSIS**

Quantitative data analysis was performed during the data analysis stage. Information and data collected through structured questionnaires were entered into KOBO software upon being received from the field.

To ensure the quality of the data entry process, adequate checks were built into the design of the data-entry screens. The data entry was validated by the research team who conducted multiple reviews for quality control purposes. As for the in-depth interviews, a qualitative analysis was performed based on the interview transcripts and engagement with relevant literature.



## 6 - RESEARCH FINDINGS



### 6.1 QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

#### 6.1.1 AWARENESS ON VAWG

The data showed a high capacity of respondents to identify VAWG as a multi-faceted phenomenon, taking different forms.

Physical assault (84%) and verbal violence (78%) were the most selected types of VAWG reported across all regions, while cyber violence (43%) and exclusion from resources and power (49%) were the least selected types. Other types were selected by 62% to 84% of individuals. For instance, in the North-West region, cyber violence was the least selected type, even though 65% of respondents selected it.

Following the general trend, three additional types of VAWG were less frequently selected by respondents in the South region, including child marriage (50%), forced marriage (57%) and rape (57%). In terms of responses per age, individuals above the age of 40 were less likely to select cyber violence (32%) and almost half of those above 60 did not select “psychological assault.” In addition, it was evident that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to identify cases of VAWG.

For instance, respondents with non-formal education were less likely to identify cyber violence (6%) than those with school education (68%) and higher education (68%).

The majority (88%) of the total sample believed that the level of VAWG is either “common” or “very common.” This trend was evident in all the different regions, with a rate of 93% in the North-East, 87% in the North-West and 83% in the South of Syria.

While at least 88% of respondents below the age of 60 responded “common” or “very common”, only 62% of those older than 60 had the same answer.

No clear relationship existed between the level of education and the belief that VAWG is common. A woman's educational attainment does not preclude her from experiencing or witnessing abuse.

The two most reported sources of information on VAWG were “other” (81%) and the government (63%). In the former, the responses were related to obtaining information from people at work, military training, educational institutions/during studies, the local community, social media, life experience, awareness done by religious institutions and NGOs, etc.

The same trend was observed on the regional level, yet with an additional highly reported response of “relatives and friend” (61%) in the North-West of Syria. In addition, people with higher levels of education were more likely to report getting information from the “government” and “relatives and friends,” and less likely to report getting information from “other” sources. Finally, the less reported source of information on VAWG was “CSOs / Community Based Organisation (CBOs) and networks” (11%).

Most respondents (76%) reported having good (33%) to moderate (43%) knowledge of VAWG. Individuals from the South of Syria had less confidence in their level of information on the topic compared to other regions, with more people reporting moderate (49%) or little knowledge (26%) and fewer reporting good knowledge (23%). The most frequent response per age was “moderate” for all groups younger than 60, and “little knowledge” for those older than 60. Educational attainment level was also linked to people’s perception of their level of knowledge. The most frequent responses were “little knowledge” (41%) for those with non-formal education, “moderate” (51%) for those with school education and “good” (51%) for those with higher education.

Awareness of legal procedures for reporting VAWG was lower than awareness of VAWG in general, with only 53% of respondents reporting having “good” (19%) or “moderate” (34%) knowledge about the former. The age group with the lowest reported awareness was individuals older than 60, with 44% stating “I have no knowledge.” Again, a positive relationship was observed between education and level of reported awareness, with only 33% of those with non-formal education reporting “good” or “moderate” knowledge, compared to 67% of those with higher education. Governorates with the most individuals reporting “little knowledge” and “I have no knowledge” were Deir Ez-Zor (54%), Qamishli (61%), Idlib (77%) and Daraa (89%).

Knowledge of the existence of government institutions addressing VAWG was low in the total sample, with 73% of respondents lacking awareness. The only exception was the North-East region where 44% of individuals reported knowing about relevant institutions, compared to 15% and 20% in the North-West and South of Syria, respectively. In terms of age and education, no difference in responses was observed across the various groups.

The same general trend was observed in the question related to knowledge of the existence of CSOs addressing VAWG. Of the respondents, 68% did not have such awareness, and this was observed in all regions and age groups. Nevertheless, there was a high tendency for respondents with higher education to report their knowledge of such institutions (44%) and respondents in the governorates of Deir-EZ-Zor (48%), Hama (64%), and As-Suwayda (54%) were also more likely to report knowing about CSOs.





Of the total sample, 88% reported that there is no hotline for reporting cases of VAWG. This was observed across all regions, age, and education groups. The only governorate with high awareness of the relevant hotline was As-Suwayda (48%). A high percentage of respondents reported no knowledge, despite the existence of a governmental hotline (9461) established by SCFPA for receiving complaints on VAWG. However, it is important to note that this hotline is inaccessible due to the lengthy instructions and procedures that the caller must follow. This hotline was set up quickly and randomly in response to social media and public criticism of the GoS's negative and passive reaction to the murder of Ayat al Refaie by her husband and his parents.

The participants were also asked if they knew of a specific governmental directorate for family protection in Syria. Of the respondents, 73% had no knowledge of such a directorate. The proportion of respondents who reported "No" varied from 71% to 75% across regions, from 69% to 79% across different age groups (with less positive answers for those older than 60), and finally, from 64% to 84% across groups with different educational attainment. The lower the educational level, the more likely people were to lack such knowledge of the directorate. Governorates that had higher awareness compared to others were Deir Ez-Zor (41%), Latakia (50%) and As-Suwayda (51%).

The majority (89%) of the total sample reported that the government and CSOs do not provide shelters for women victims of VAWG. In the cases of the government, all regional, age and education groups showed similar trends. Qamishli had the highest proportion of respondents reporting "Yes" when asked if services were provided by the government (43%). Among participants in As-Suwayda, 40% responded that CSOs provided these services.

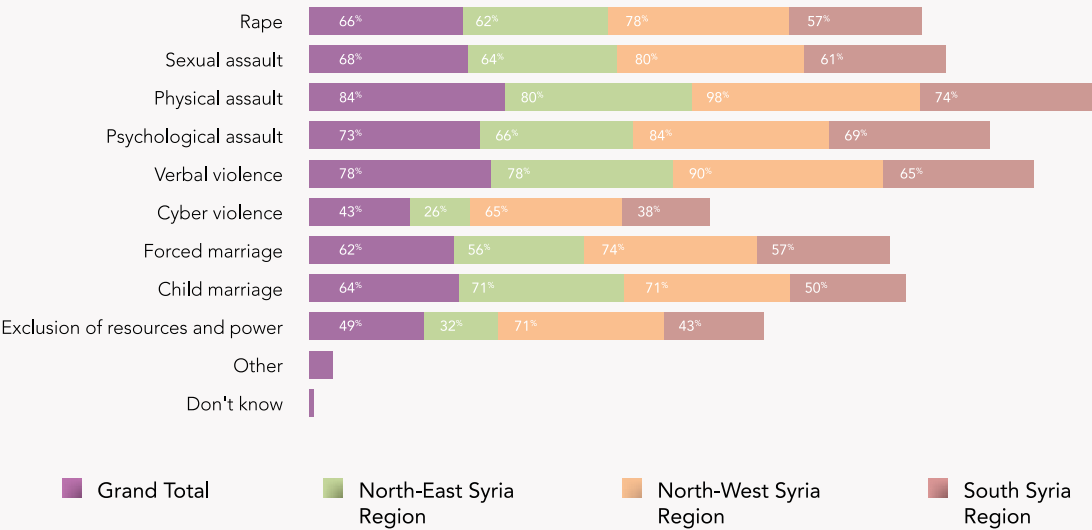
More than half of the total sample (54%) believed that CSOs are providing victims of VAWG with psychological services. The highest rate of positive answers was recorded in the North-West region (63%) and the lowest in the North-East region (47%). Furthermore, the higher the level of educational attainment, the more positive results were reported; the proportion of positive answers increased from 35% in the non-formal education group to 65% in the higher education group. Governorates with the lowest proportion of respondents reporting the contribution of CSOs were Qamishli (26%), As-Suwayda (35%), Aleppo (45%) and Latakia (49%).

Participants' knowledge of legal services provided by CSOs for victims of VAWG was lower compared to their knowledge of psychological support provided by CSOs. Only 28% of the total sample agreed that these services

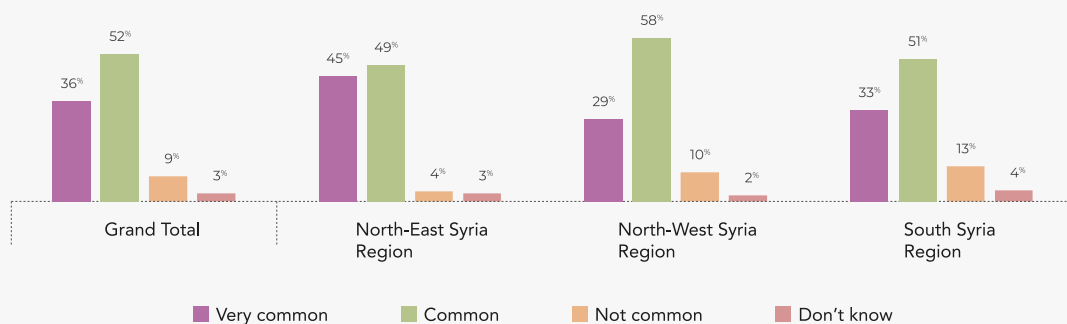
are being provided; this rate is significantly lower for those who are older than 60 (20%) and higher for individuals with higher education (40%). Governorates with more negative answers were Al-Hasakah (6%), Daraa (7%) and Qamishli (14%).

The higher level of awareness of the existence of psychological services compared to legal support is mainly attributed to the fact that the psychological services are more commonly provided in shelters and service centres than legal counselling.

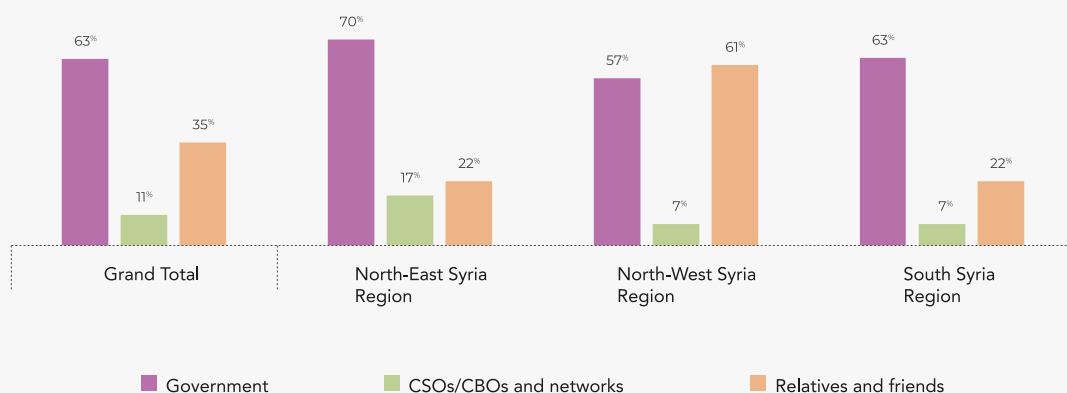
### 1.1 What does VAWG mean to you?



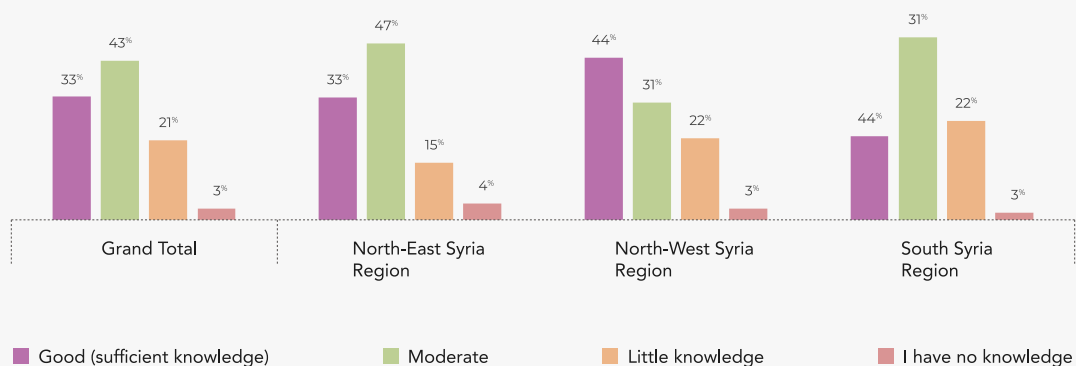
## 1.2. What is the prevalence of VAWG in your community, according to you?



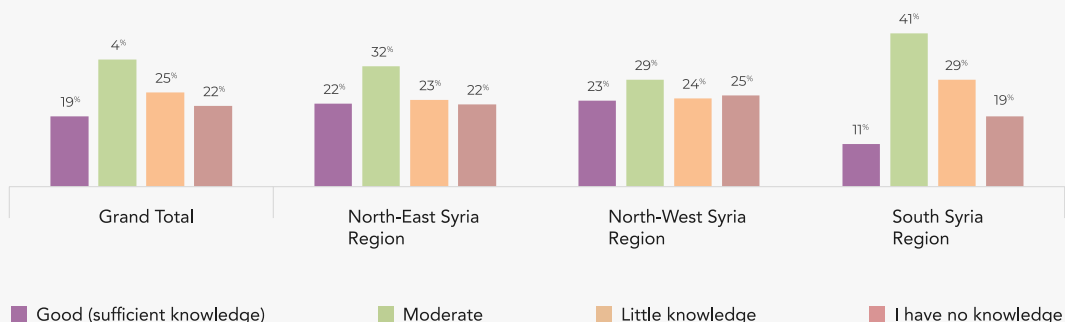
## 1.3 What are your sources of information about VAWG?



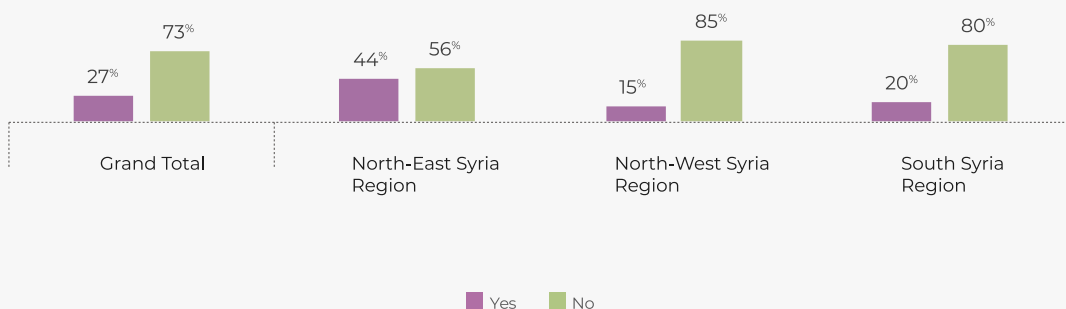
## 1.4 According to you, your knowledge about VAWG is:



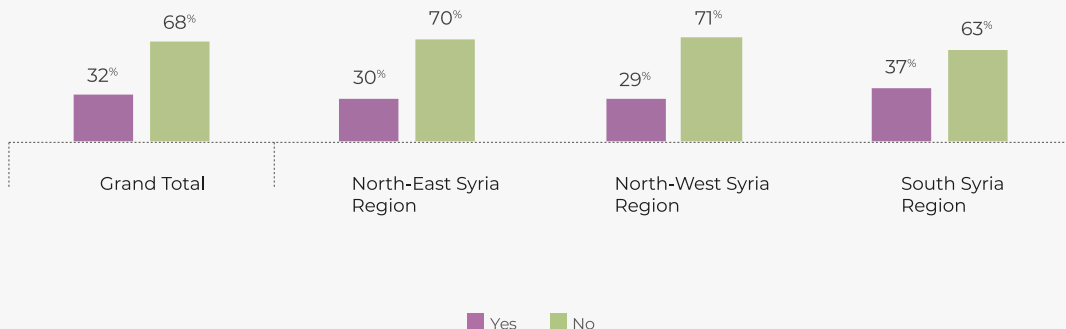
## 1.5 Your awareness about legal procedures for reporting VAWG is:



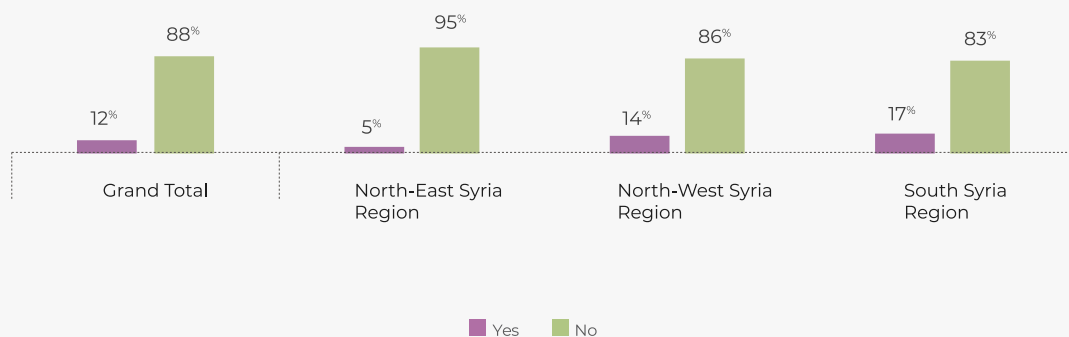
## 1.6 Are you aware of the existence of government institutions that address VAWG in your area?



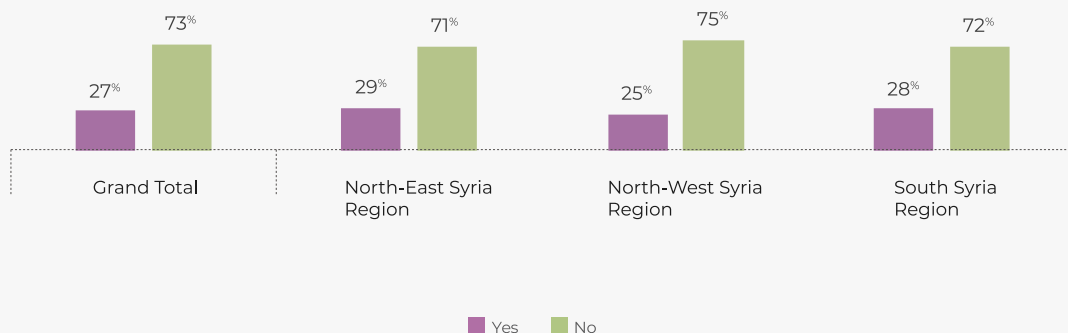
## 1.7 Are you aware of the existence of civil society institutions that address VAWG in your area?



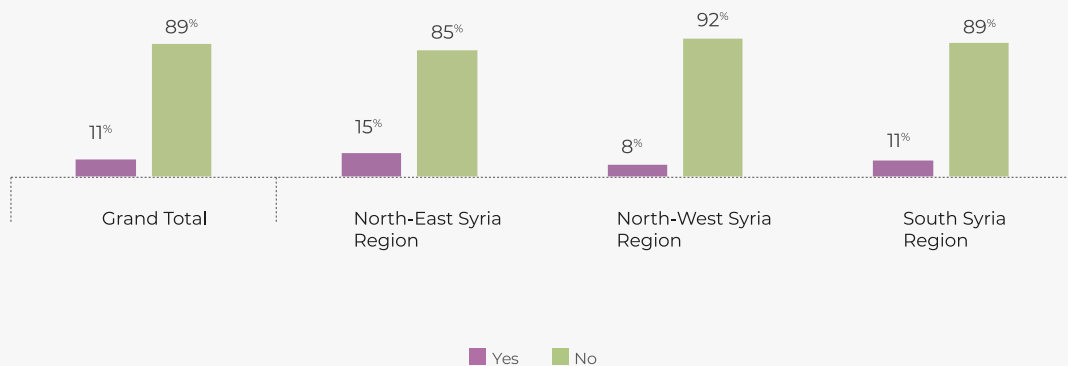
### 1.8 Is there a hotline specifically for reporting cases of VAWG in Syria?



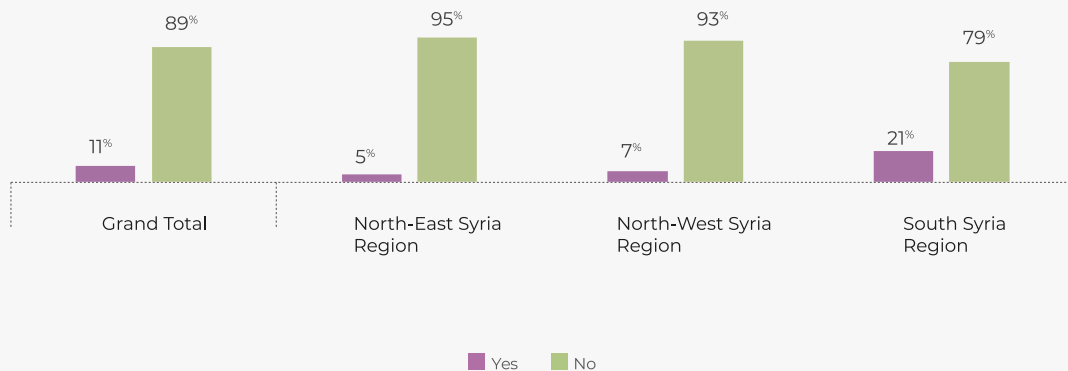
### 1.9 Is there a specific governmental directorate for protection of families in Syria?



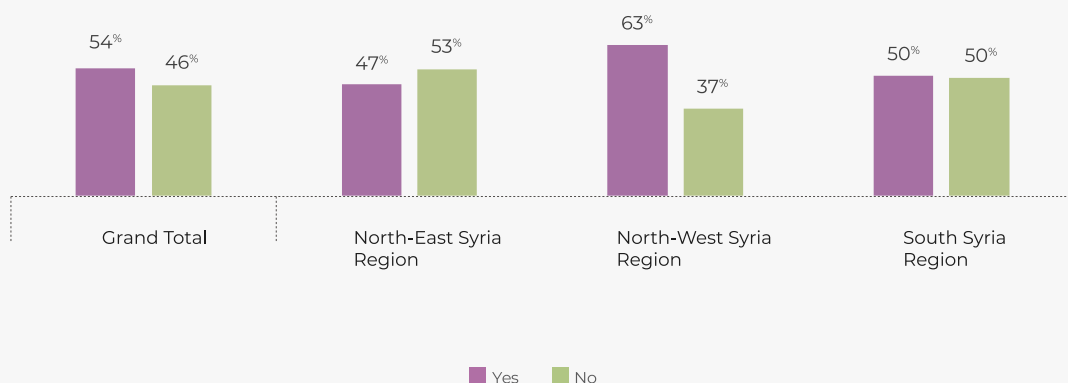
### 1.10 Does the government provide shelters for women victims of VAWG?



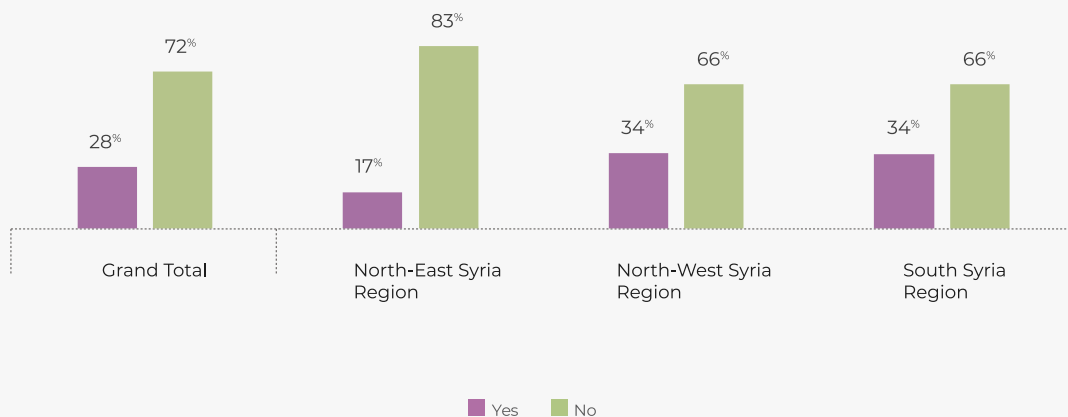
### 1.11 Do the CSOs provide shelters for women victims of VAWG?



### 1.12 Do the CSOs provide women victims of VAWG with psychological services?



### 1.13 Do the CSOs provide women victims of VAWG with some legal services?



## 6.1.2 BELIEFS AND OPINIONS ON VAWG

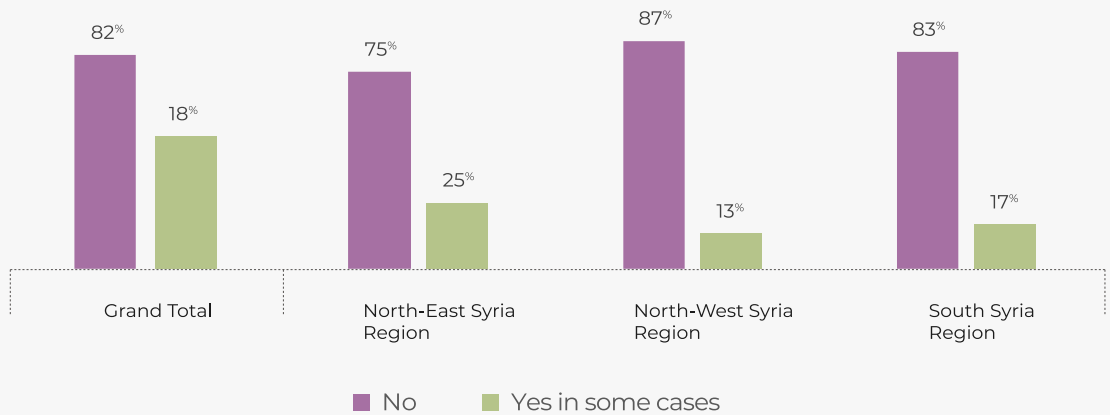
The participants were asked whether it is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife in three scenarios: “if she neglects her children”, “argues with him” and “refuses to have sex”. Similar trends in the responses were observed across the total sample in all scenarios and across regional, age and educational groups. Violence for the purpose of refusing sex was less accepted by the participants than for the other two scenarios. In total, those tolerating violence for the first, second and third scenarios were 18%, 15% and 11%, respectively. The vast majority of participants in all age groups found violence unacceptable in all the scenarios, except for those older than 60 of whom only 52% found violence unacceptable in the case of neglecting children, argue with husband (55%) and refusing sex (68%). An additional outlier group was people with non-formal education, of whom 43%, 52% and 67% were against violence in the first, second, and third scenarios, respectively.

Of the respondents, 68% were against decriminalising rape in situations related to women’s clothing or behaviour and 18% were neutral. The different regions did not demonstrate a strong commitment to unconditional protection of women from rape, except for the North-West where 83% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed to the decriminalisation of rape. Individuals over the age of 60 (56%) and those with non-formal education (47%) are less likely than other groups to stand against decriminalisation of rape depending on women’s clothing or behaviour. It is evident from these results that there is a correlation between education and a positive opinion towards criminalising perpetrators regardless of women’s clothing and behaviour. Similarly, governorates with the lowest proportion of respondents agreeing on decriminalising rape in such circumstances are Deir Ez-Zor (49%) and As-Suwayda (40%).

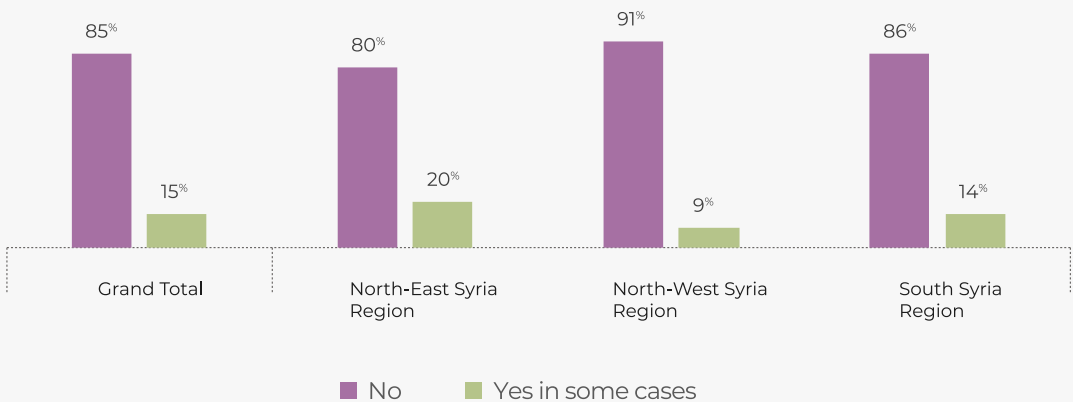
More than half (54%) of the total sample were against having brothers take responsibility for controlling the behaviour of their female siblings. Individuals from South Syria (46%), older than 60 (28%) and those with non-formal education (26%) had the fewest responses that disagreed with this responsibility. Again, the findings confirmed that educated women have more positive and progressive responses towards issues related to gender equality. The lowest scores were recorded in Al-Hasakah, Deir Ez-Zor, Daraa and As- Suwayda.



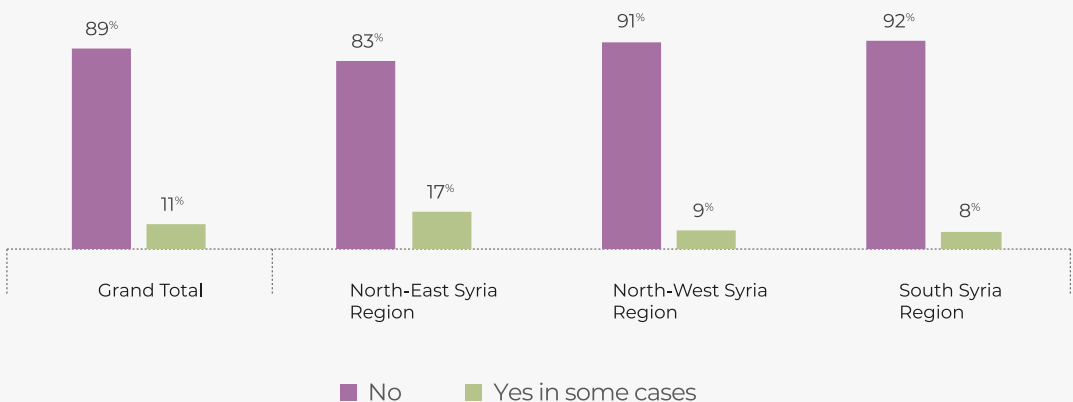
### 2.1.1 According to you, is it acceptable for the husband to hit his wife if she neglects their children?



### 2.1.2 According to you, is it acceptable for the husband to hit his wife if she argues with him?

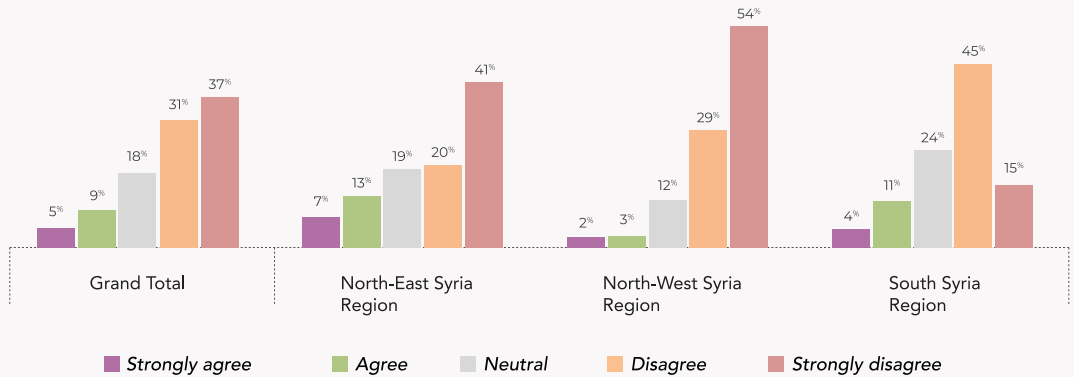


### 2.1.3 According to you, is it acceptable for the husband to hit his wife if she refuses sex?

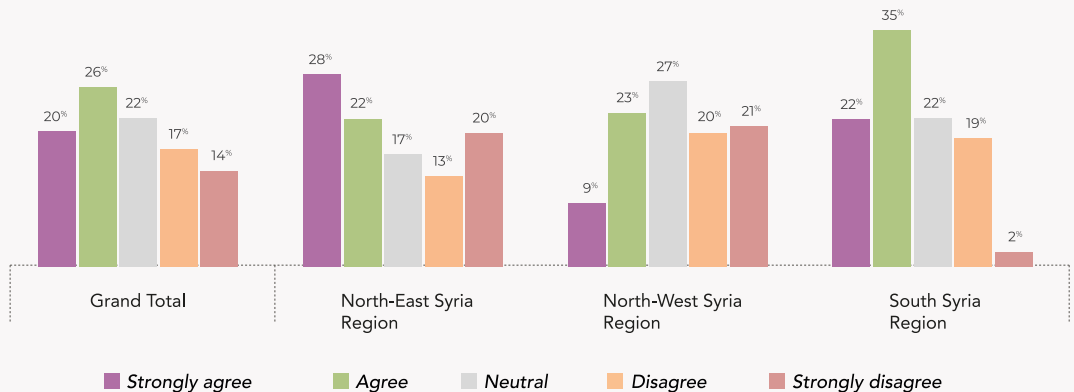




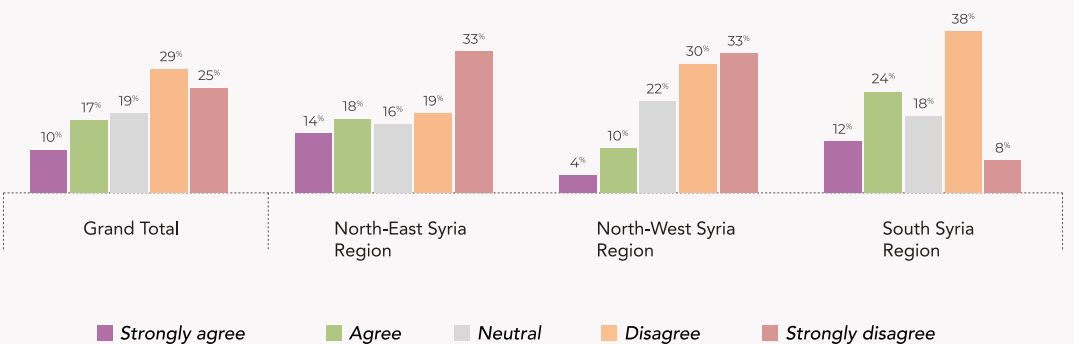
## 2.2 Rape should be decriminalised in some situations related to women's clothing and behavior.



## 2.3 The man should have guardianship over his wife and family.



## 2.4 Boys should be responsible for the behavior of their sisters, even if they are younger than their sisters.



## Opinions on laws related to women's rights

The majority of the respondents (61%) believed that the laws and procedures for the protection of women from violence are not adequate. This is true for all regions, yet individuals in North-East Syria (45%) were less likely to confirm this legal drawback compared to other areas. In parallel, all age groups consider that laws and procedures are not sufficient, except those older than 60: only 36% of this age group believed the same while 56% said "I don't know." Level of educational attainment was also a determinant of the responses, indicating a clear positive correlation between education and the awareness that a stronger legislative framework is required to protect women from violence. Governorates with the lowest scores were Al-Hasakah, Deir Ez-Zor, Idlib and Daraa.

For the question of whether women's rights and equal participation in all spheres of life are recognised by the law in the same way as they are for men, trends observed in the total sample, as well as across the different regions, age and educational groups were similar. Of the respondents, 73% did not agree with the statement. Three governorates had the lowest proportion of respondents considering that existing laws don't ensure women's rights and equal participation: Al-Hasakah (54%), Hama (52%) and As-Suwayda (51%).

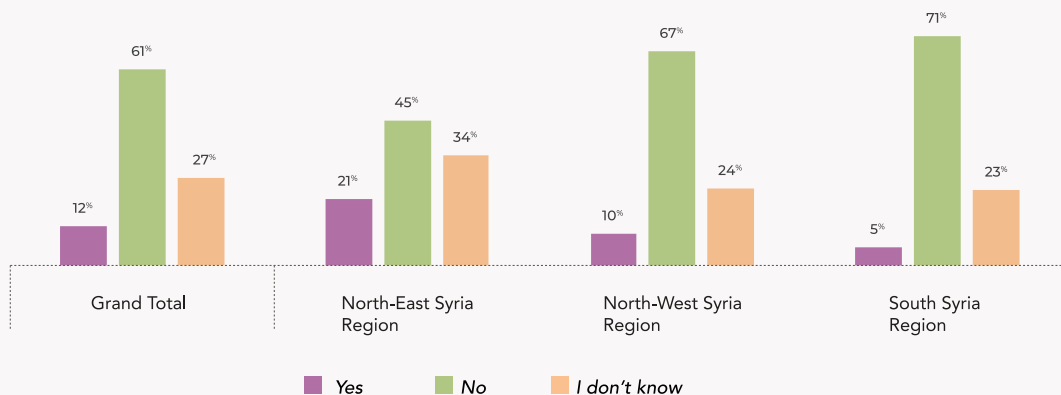
The same was true for the question of whether women have the same financial rights as men under the law, both during marriage and after divorce. Of the total sample, 80% disagreed with this statement. Al-Hasakah (54%), Hama (52%) and As-Suwayda (51%) were again the three governorates where the lowest proportion of respondents considered that women don't have the same financial rights as men.

The significance of economic violence is reflected in the fact that 80% of respondents believed that women who are victims of violence by their husbands or family stay with them because of their lack of financial resources. The lowest percentage of people in each demographic group who agreed with this was 75% in the North-East region, 74% in the 18-25 age group, and 68% in the non-formal education group. The lowest percentages at the governorate level were observed in Al-Hasakah (67%), Deir Ez-Zor (69%) and As-Suwayda (53%).

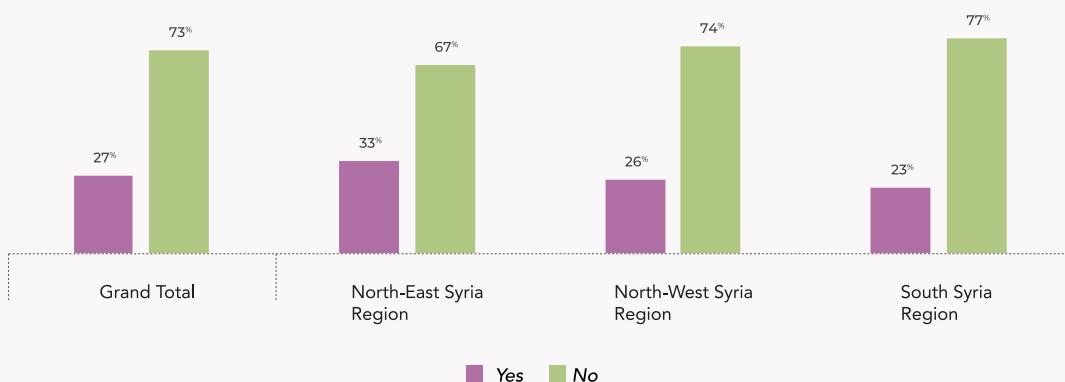
In contrast, 66% of the respondents believed that women have the right to movement in public spaces in the same way as men. This ranged from 64% to 70% across the different regions, with the lowest rate among those over 60. Interestingly, only 47% of the respondents with non-formal education agreed with this statement, compared to 80% of those who had completed higher education. The governorates with the highest percentage of people agreeing that women have freedom of movement were Al-Hasakah (73%), Qamishli (84%), Latakia (93%) and As-Suwayda (71%).



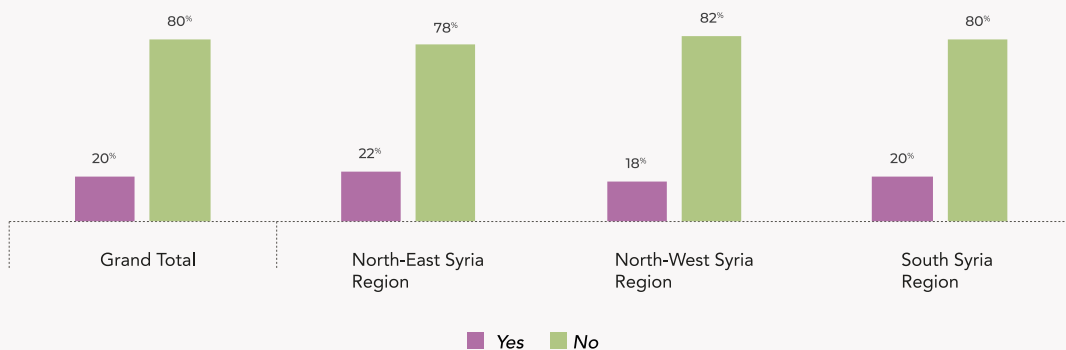
## 2.5 Are the laws and procedures for protection of women from violence sufficient in Syria?



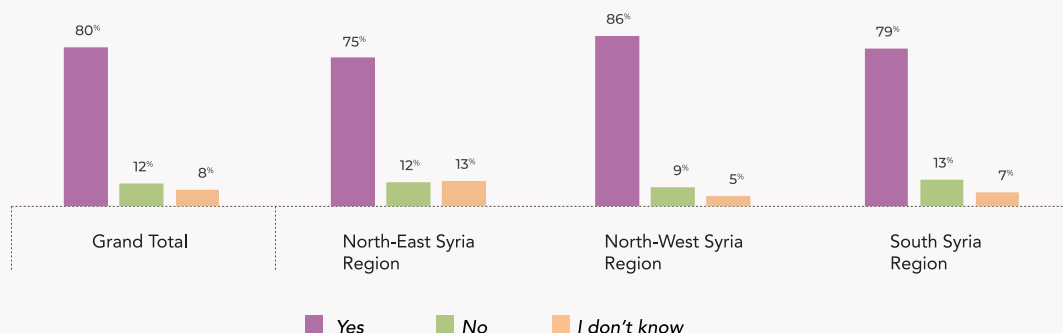
## 2.6 Do you think that women's rights and equal participation in all spheres of life are recognised by the law in the same way as men's?



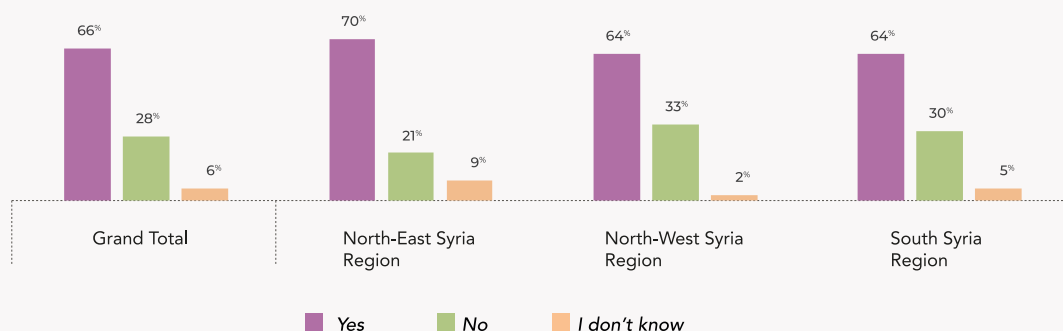
## 2.7 Do you think women have the same financial rights as men under the law during marriage or after divorce?



## 2.8 Do you think that women who are victims of violence by their husband or family accept to stay with them because of her lack of financial resources?



## 2.9 Do you think that women have the right to freedom of movement in the public space in the way as men do?



## Opinions on VAWG and services for women victims

A low percentage of participants agreed that it is easy for women to access services such as the police, health care and legal and protection/assistance services. Only 24% reported it is easy to access police, health care (37%), legal aid (23%) and protection/assistance services (23%). The North-East region reported the lowest proportion of respondents considering access as “easy” for the first three services, with Police (14%), health care (31%), legal aid (14%), protection/assistance services (23%). Of the respondents, 69% reported an “increase” (41%) or “massive increase” (28%) in VAWG

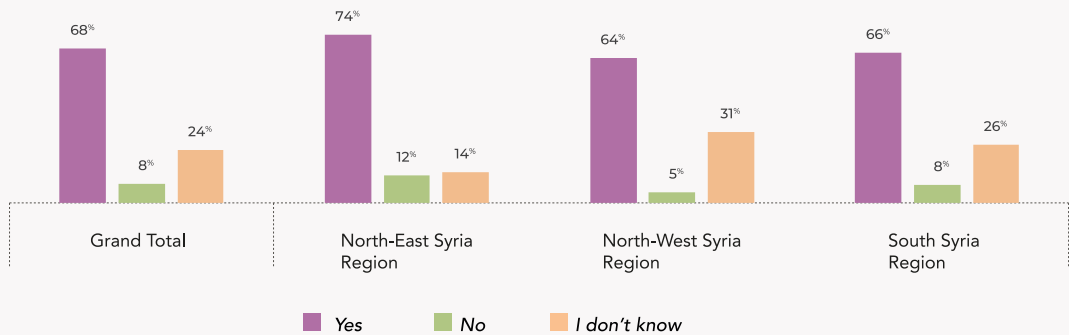
cases since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. North-West Syria is the region where the highest proportion of respondents (77%) report an increase (50%) or a massive increase (27%) in VAWG. According to the participants, all types of VAWG increased during the war. Cyber violence (31%) was the least reported type, while physical assault (74%), psychological assault (63%), verbal violence (61%), and early marriage (60%) were the most frequent forms selected. As per each region, the most selected forms were in the North-East region: physical assault (72%) and early marriage (78%), in the North-West: physical assault (89%) and verbal violence (78%), in the South Syria, physical assault (61%), and psychological assault (58%).

The situation in North-West Syria looks particularly horrifying, with a higher proportion of respondents as compared to other regions reporting an increase in VAWG especially in physical assault (89%), sexual violence (74%), rape (67%), verbal violence (78%), psychological assault (77%), early marriage (65%) and forced marriage (61%). In North-East Syria, a significant 78% of respondents believed that child marriage has increased.

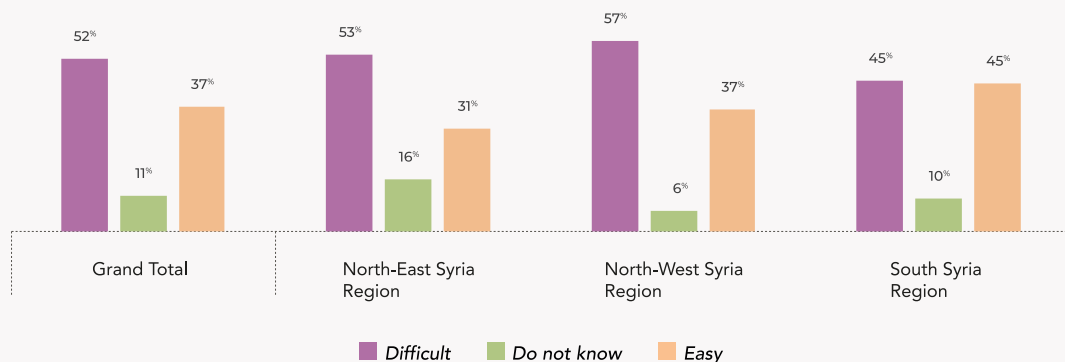
Of the total sample, 73% had not heard of or participated in campaigns set up by the government or civilian institutions to support women who are subjected to violence. The high percentage of women who were unaware of these campaigns to support women victims of VAWG indicates that such campaigns and preventive actions are insufficient or non-existent in some areas. All regional, age and education attainment groups showed similar trends, except for the North-West region, where a higher proportion of women (22%) had heard of or participated in such events, and a lower proportion in the same region (64%) among respondents with non-formal education who did not.



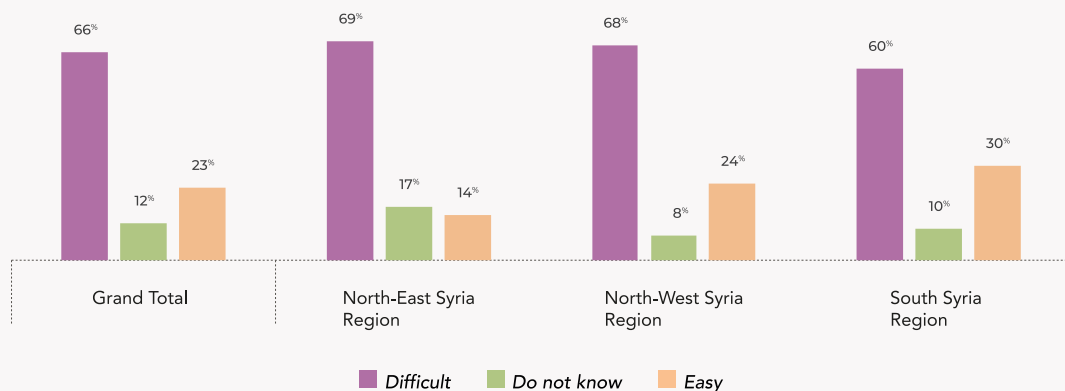
2.10.1 Is it difficult or easy for women victims of VAWG to access the Police?



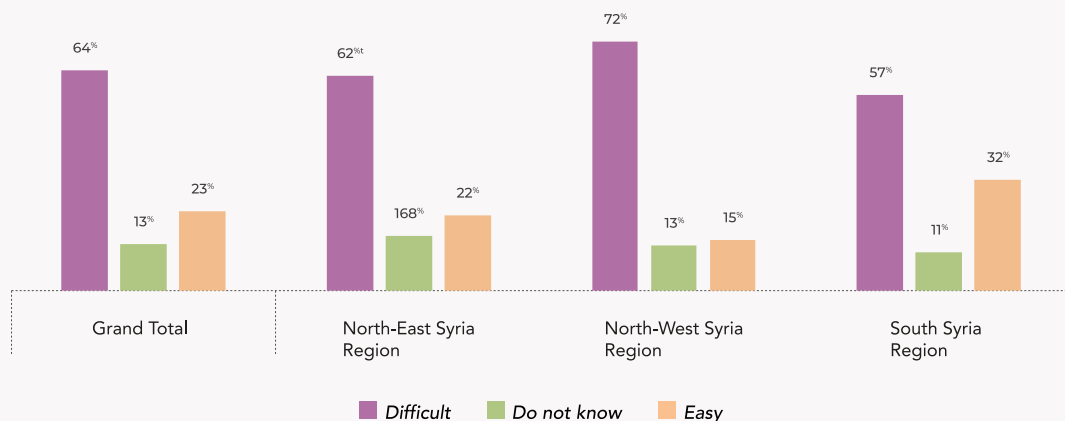
## 2.10.2 Is it difficult or easy for women victims of VAWG to access healthcare?



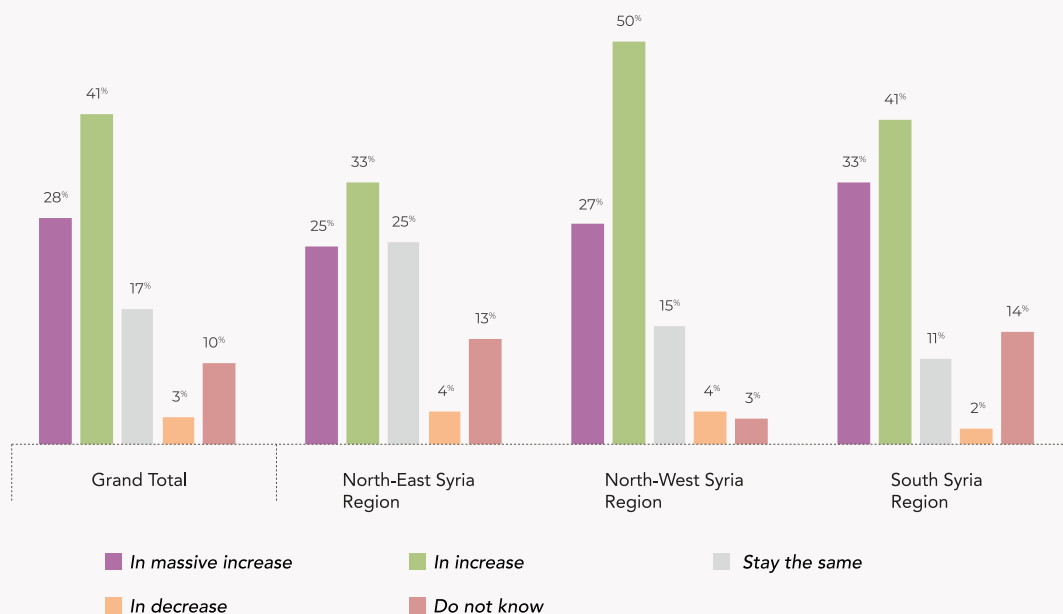
## 2.10.3 Is it difficult or easy for women victims of VAWG to utilise the legal aid?



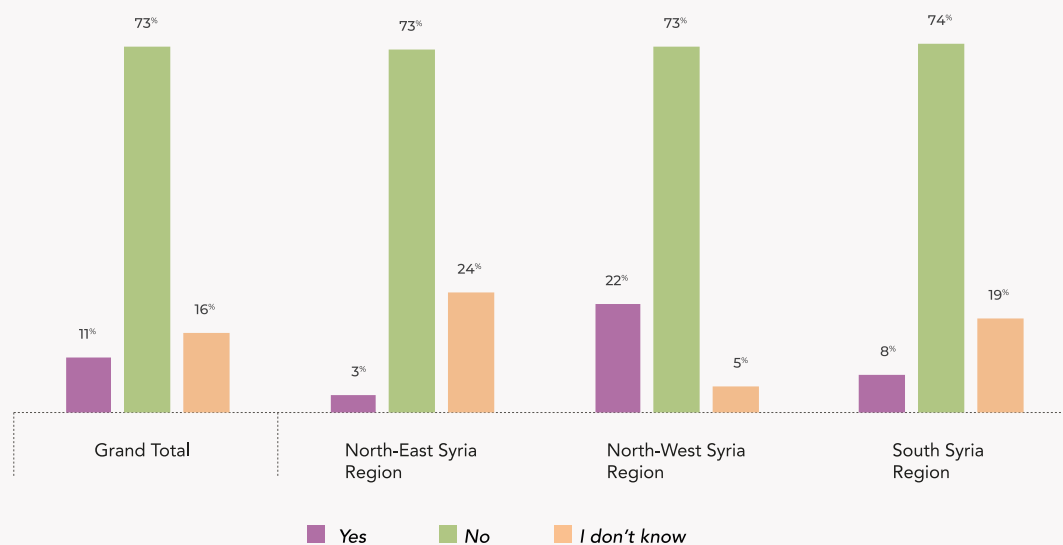
## 2.10.4 Is it difficult or easy for women victims of VAWG to access protection/assistance services?



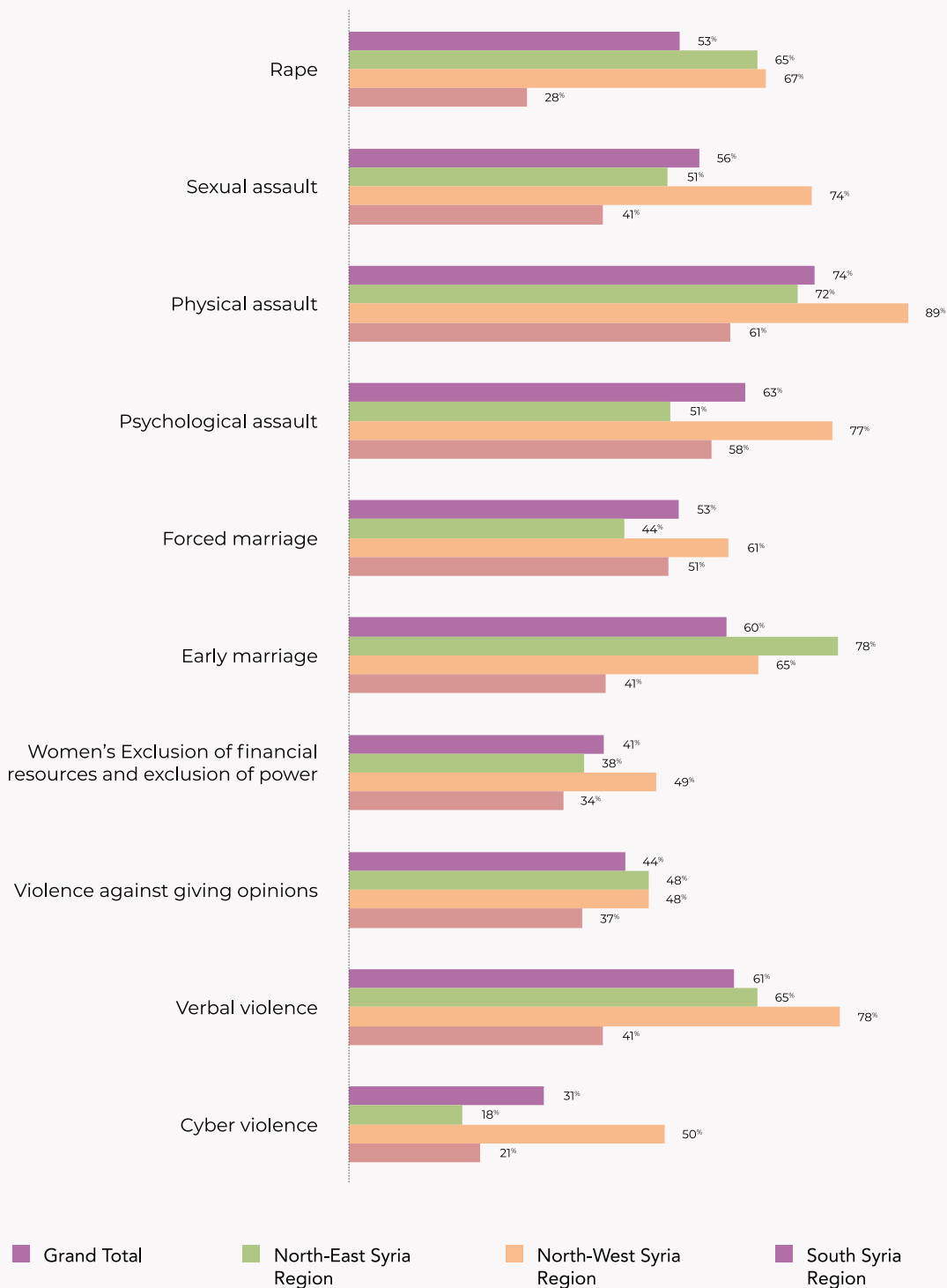
## 2.11 Since the beginning of armed conflict in Syria, VAWG is:



## 2.12 In the past year, have you heard of or participated in campaigns set up by the government or civilian institutions in Syria to support women who are subjected to violence?



## 2.13 The form/forms of VAWG that increased the most significantly due to the armed conflict in Syria is:







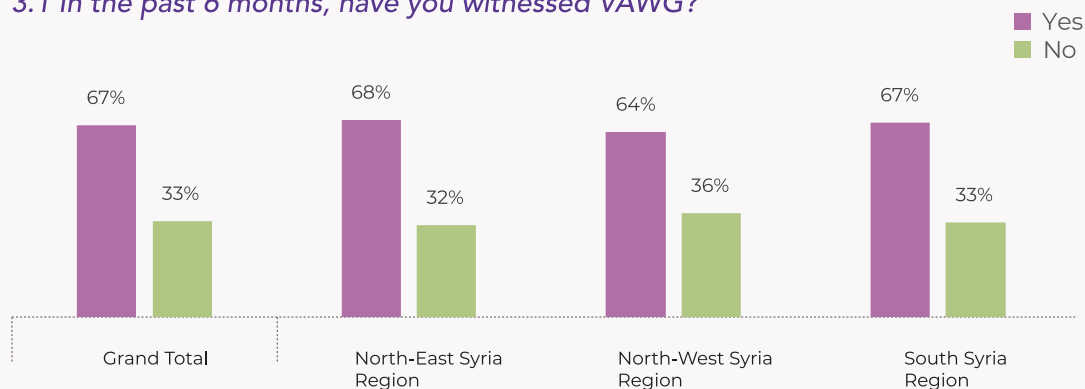
### 6.1.3 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF VAWG

The majority of the respondents (67%) reported witnessing cases of VAWG in the last 6 months. This trend was observed across different regions and age groups with minor variations. The educational attainment level of individuals had no impact on the likelihood of witnessing such violence. The governorates with the highest proportion of respondents having observed cases of VAWG were Qamishli, Hama, Idlib, Damascus and As-Suwayda. Furthermore, among the respondents who reported witnessing VAWG (N=807), the most common types of VAWG witnessed were physical assault (60%) and psychological abuse (63%). The trend was true across all regions, age groups, and educational groups.

More than half of the total sample (56%) reported that women who experience violence do not seek help, while only 32% reported that they do seek help. The remaining 12% did not know. This trend was observed in all socio-demographic groups included in the study. The governorates with the highest rates of victims not seeking help were Qamishli, Aleppo, Hama and Idlib. Furthermore, among the respondents who reported that women do seek help when experiencing violence (N=390), the vast majority (78%) reported that victims first seek help from their relatives. Other sources of help were selected by a maximum of 8% of respondents. This trend was again observed across all socio-demographic groups included in the study, with the only significant exceptions being in Latakia (38% of respondents reported that victims first seek help from the police) and Aleppo (44% of respondents reported that victims first seek help from a VAWG centre).

“Shame” (72%), “Rejection or being ostracised by family and friends” (71%), and “Fear of consequences and the threat of the perpetrator” (70%) were all commonly identified by the respondents as barriers hindering women from reporting violence. The option “nothing can be done” was also selected but at a lower, yet significant rate (41%). A higher proportion of respondents (58%) considered “nothing can be done” in the North-West of Syria. People with non-formal education were less likely to choose options other than “shame” than people with other levels of education.

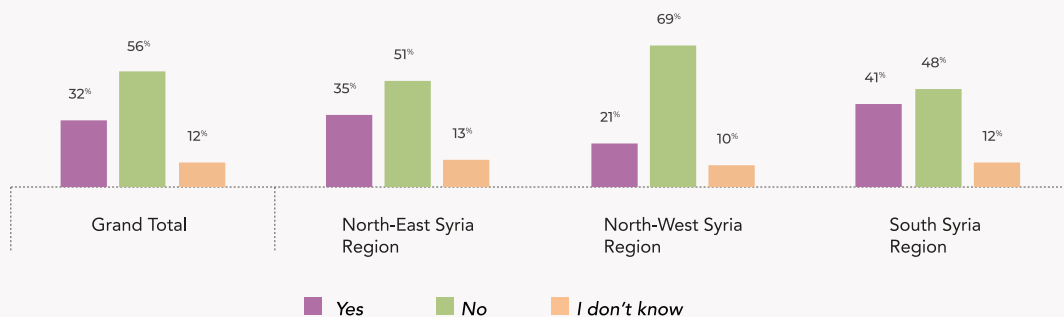
#### 3.1 In the past 6 months, have you witnessed VAWG?



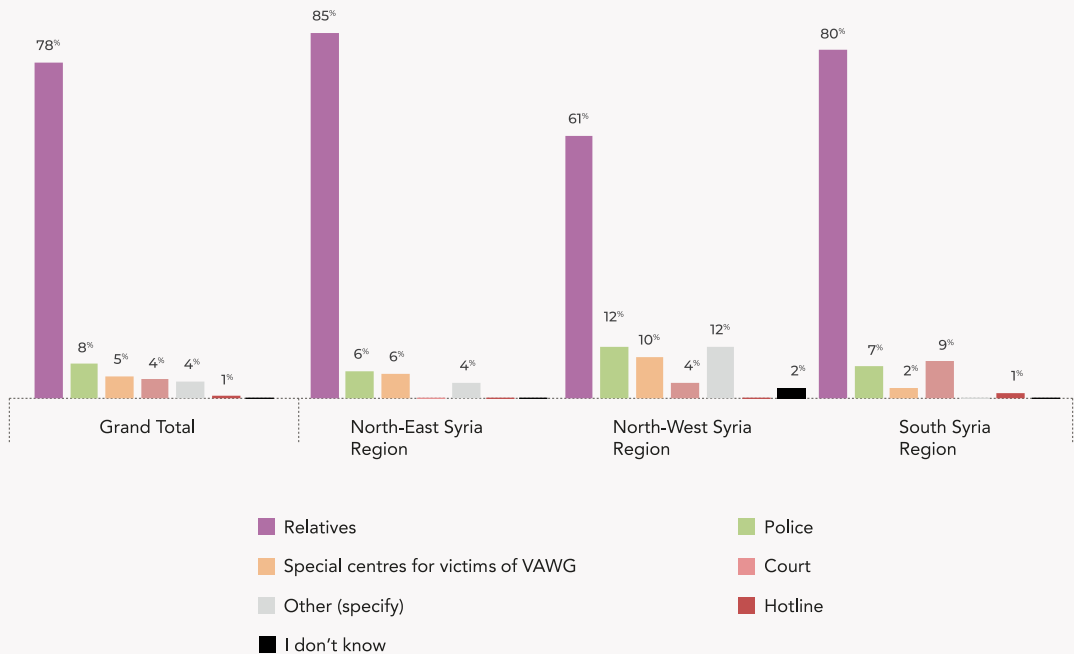
### 3.2 If yes, what type of VAWG have you witnessed?



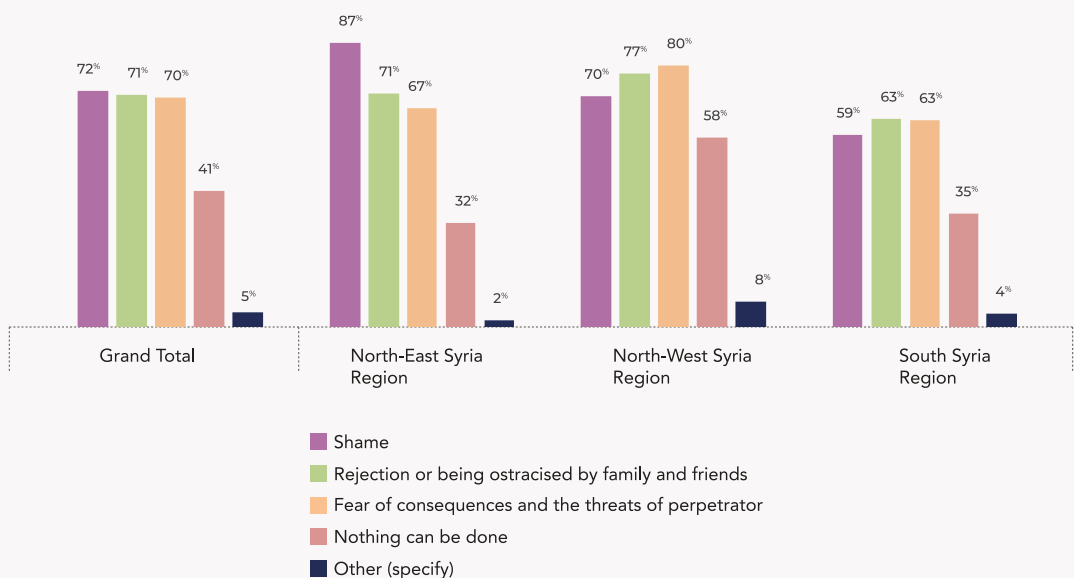
### 3.3 Do women who experience violence look for help?



### 3.4 In your experience, what kind of help do victims of VAWG seek first?



### 3.5 In your experience, what are the barriers that hinder women from reporting violence?

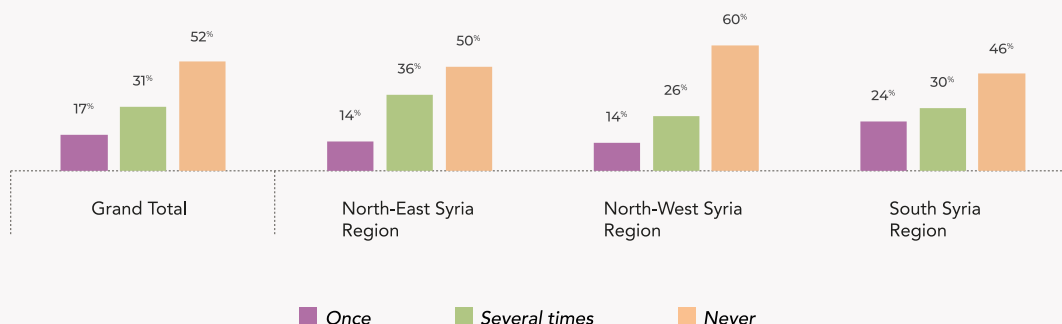


According to the participants, in the past year, the rates of experiencing at least once VAWG during the past 12 months were as follows: insult in public (48%), forced sexual contact/act (16%), sexual intercourse (6%), prevention from speaking to friends or family members (34%), and a family member or spouse refusing or ridiculing opinions (51%). Regarding insults in public spaces, those who lived in South Syria, were between the ages of 18 and 40, had attained higher levels of education, or resided in Deir Ez-Zor, Qamishli, Aleppo, Damascus or As-Suwayda, were more likely to report experiencing such violence. For forced sexual contact/act, the trends were consistent across different groups, with slightly higher incidents reported in Deir Ez-Zor (28%), Hama (27%), and As-Suwayda (30%). As for forced sexual intercourse, the only "outlier" was As-Suwayda, with 18% reporting having faced such violence at least once. In terms of preventing participants from speaking to friends or family members, individuals from North-East Syria, those between the ages of 18-25 (43%), those with non-formal (41%) or school education (43%) and those residing in Deir Ez-Zor (57%), Idlib (53%) and As-Suwayda (44%) were more likely to experience such threats.

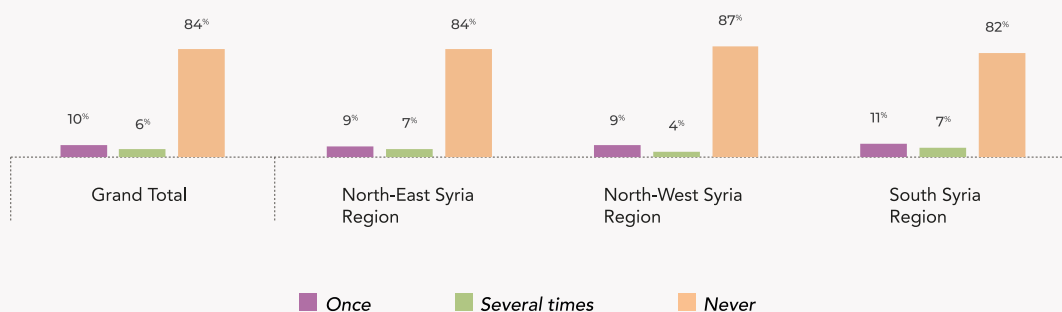
Finally, there was a greater tendency for those in North-East Syria (59%), individuals aged 18 to 25 (61%), those with non-formal (57%) or school education (63%), and individuals living in Qamishli (64%) and Idlib (66%) to report more incidents related to a family member or spouse refusing or ridiculing the opinions of the participants.

Exclusion from decision-making within the household and lack of control over expenses/income were also prevalent. 60% of participants reported experiencing exclusion from decision-making in the household either sometimes or always. Among them, respondents from the North-East region were more likely to report such incidents (70%), while fewer cases were noted in the North-West (50%). There were also fewer cases reported by individuals above the age of 60 and those with higher education. 58% of respondents have experienced exclusion from control over expenses and income either sometimes or always. Among this group people from North-East Syria (70%), aged between 18 and 25 (68%), and those with non-formal (72%) or school education (66%) were more likely to report such incidents.

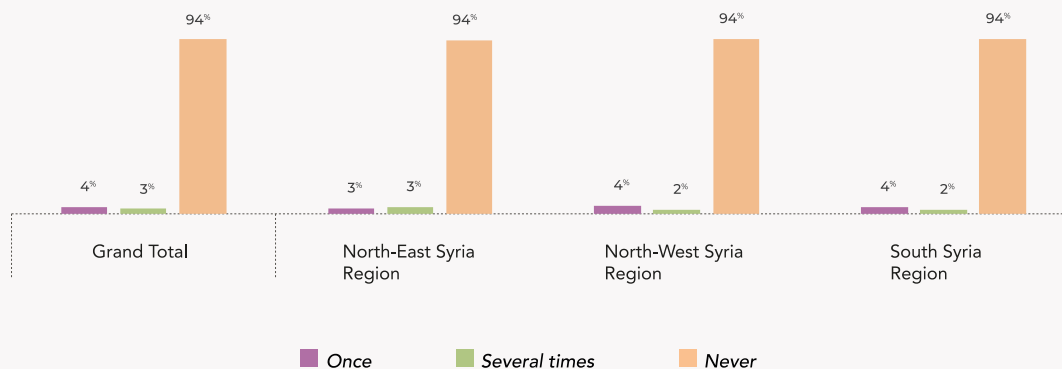
### 3.6 During the past 12 months, have you been insulted in the street, public transportation or public spaces?



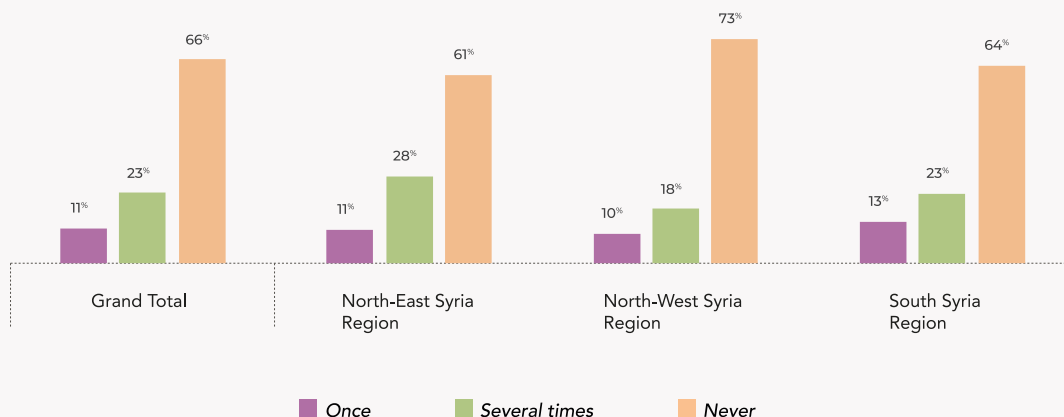
### 3.7 During the past 12 months, did anyone attempt or force you to undergo or perform any sexual contract/acts against your will?



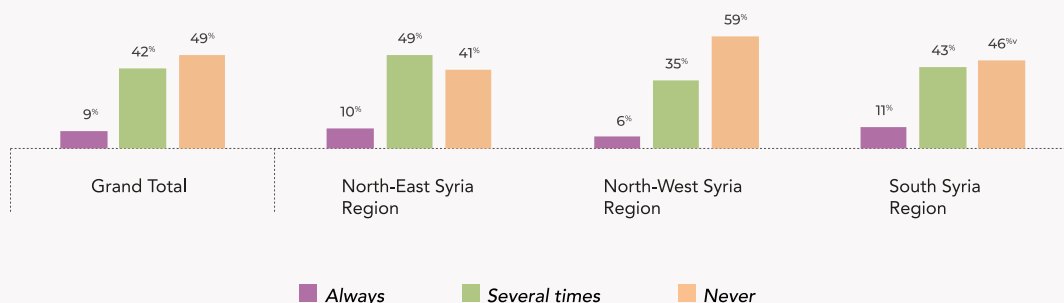
### 3.8 During the past 12 months, did anyone try or managed to have sexual intercourse with you against your will?



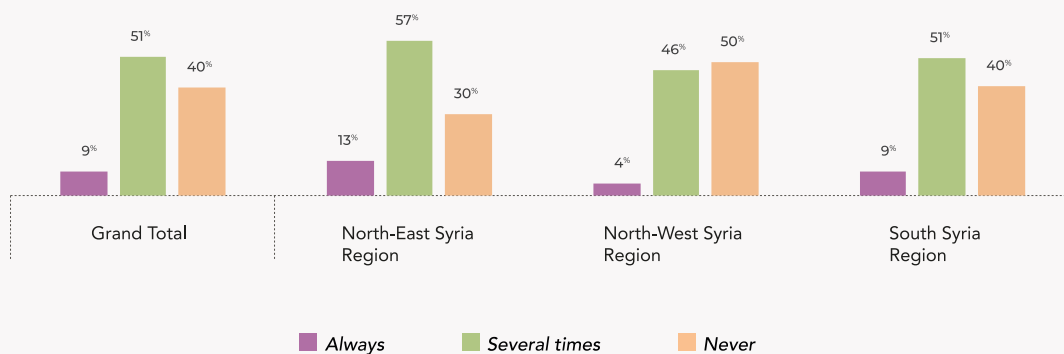
### 3.9 During the past 12 months, has your husband/family members prevented you from meeting or talking to friends or family members?



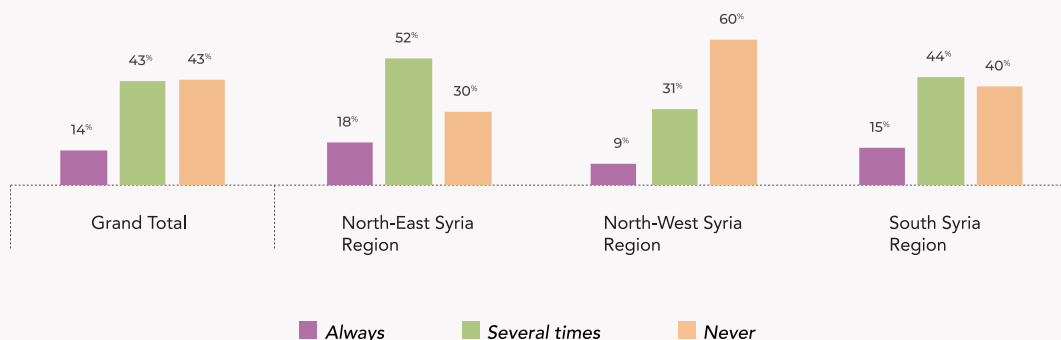
### 3.10 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members refuse to take your opinions into consideration, ridicule them or attempt to tell you what you should think.



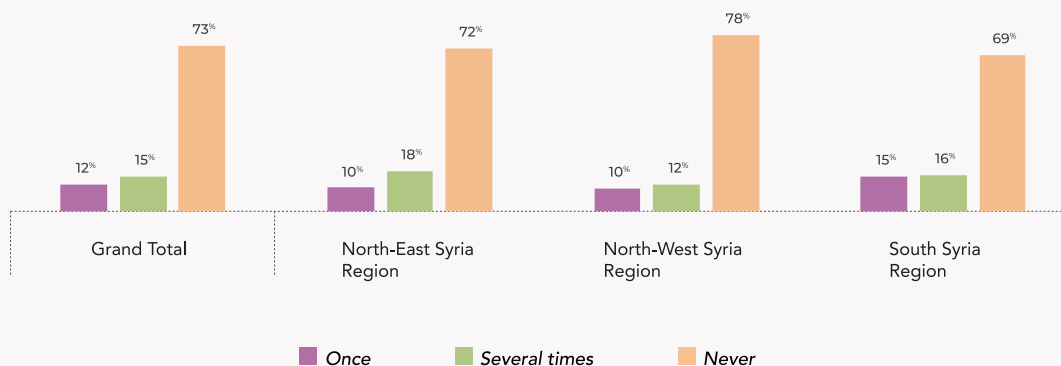
### 3.11 Do you encounter exclusion from decision making within the household?



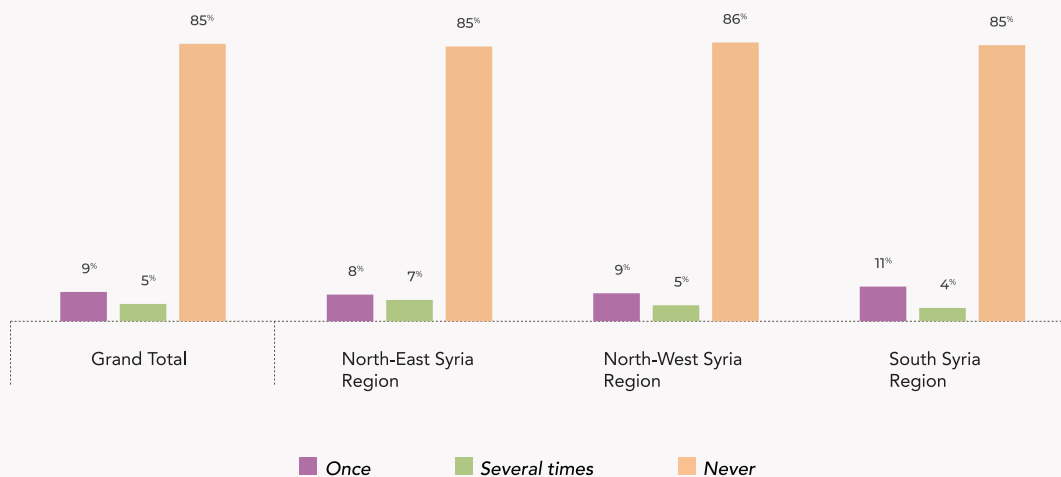
### 3.12 Do you encounter exclusion from control over expenses or income?



### 3.13 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members threaten and/or pressure you financially?



### 3.14 In the past 12 months, have your spouse or family members prevented or postponed your doctor's visit?

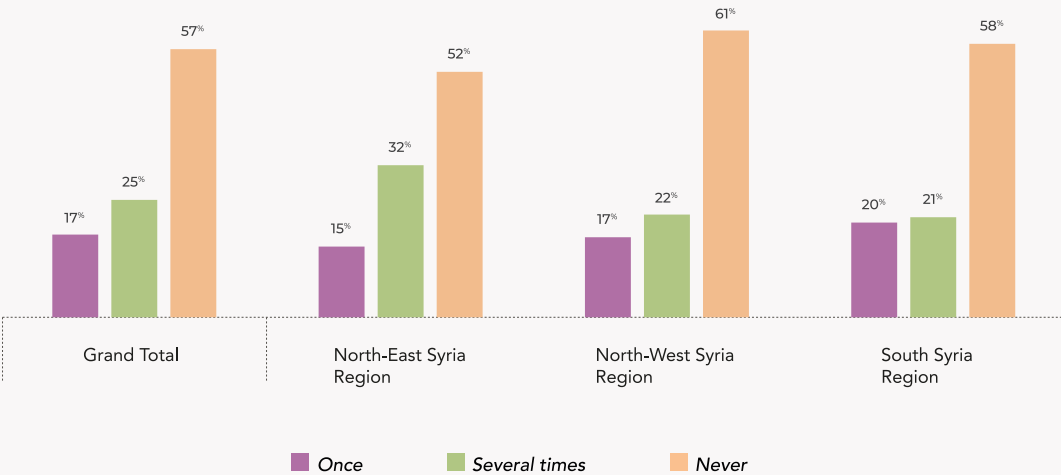


The majority of respondents (73%) reported never having experienced their spouse/family members financially threatening them or limiting their access to money during the past 12 months. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 (35%), those with non-formal education (38%), and people residing in Deir Ez-Zor (43%) , Idlib (44%), and As-Suwayda (37%) were more likely to receive financial threats or face actual restrictions. Similarly, 85% of respondents reported not having experienced in the past 12 months that one's spouse or family member prevented or postponed their doctors' visits. Individuals with non-formal education (23%) or those residing in Deir Ez-Zor (33%), Idlib (23%) and As-Suwayda (24%) were more likely to experience such forms of violence.

In contrast, there was a high prevalence (43%) of violence involving insults or abuse from a spouse or a family member towards the respondents during the past 12 months. This type of violence was less likely to be reported by individuals above the age of 60 (31%) and those with higher education (29%).

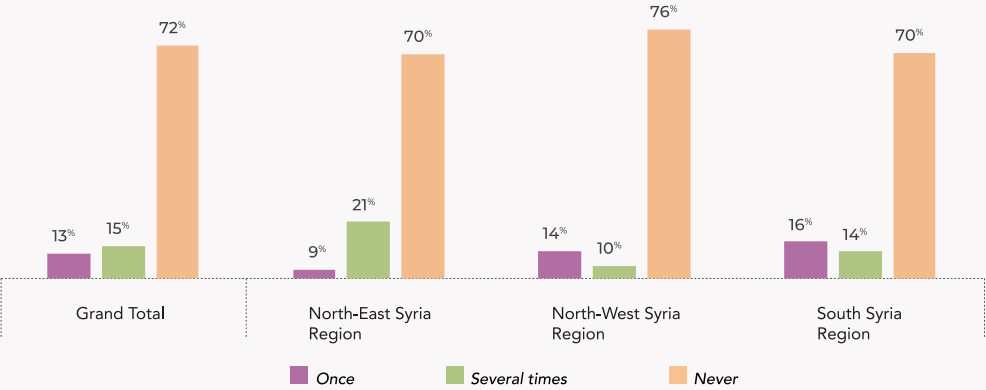
In the previous 12 months, 28% of women had experienced physical abuse and 11% of women had experienced death threats. The prevalence of physical abuse was higher in North-East Syria and South Syria (30% each), among individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 (35%), among individuals with non-formal (45%) or school education (35%), and among those residing in Al Hasakah (50%) and Idlib (55%). Regarding death threats, incidents were more likely to be experienced in the South of Syria (18%), specifically in As-Suwayda (30%). Among the 11% who had experienced death threat only 8% reported having lodged a complaint.

3.15 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members insult you or abuse you?

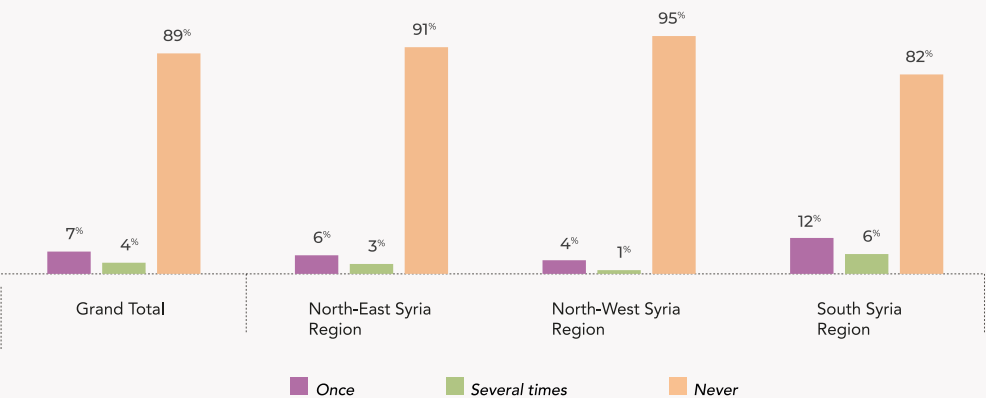




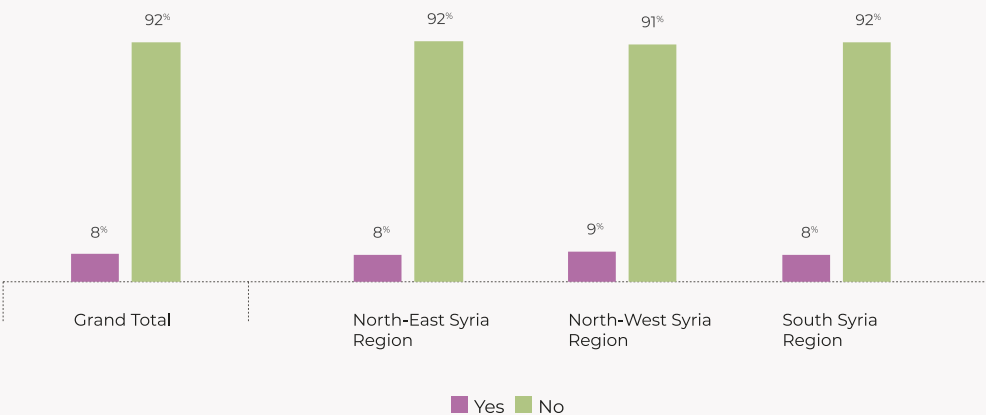
3.16 During the past 12 months, did your husband/family members slap you or inflict other physical abuse on you?



3.17 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members utter death threats against you?



3.18 If it happened, after this incident, did you lodge a complaint?



## 6.2 QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

### 6.2.1 DEFINITION OF VAWG AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

**“Any look from a person who claims guardianship over a woman is violence, any superior and authoritarian behaviour from an employer is violence, any barrier to a woman’s personal will to make decisions that concern her is violence, and any violation of these rights and women’s dignity is violence.”** – Women and children’s rights expert and activist.


According to experts, VAWG comprises any act that limits women’s personal freedoms and violates at least one of their rights. VAWG encompass a range of acts which are not limited to physical violence, such as beating and physical abuse. They also include psychological, sexual, legal, economic, and political violence, deprivation of education, and cyberviolence against women. Cyberviolence has emerged as a significant threat to the safety and lives of women and girls, involving physical, financial, and psychological blackmail. An observer from Qamishli stated that cyberviolence became more prominent during Covid-19 and subsequent Cholera lockdowns, which made it necessary to launch campaigns to raise women’s awareness regarding all types of violence.

A women’s rights expert and activist considered discrimination against women as any differentiation, exclusion, or restriction made based on the woman’s gender, which hinders the recognition of her rights in all political, economic, social, cultural, and civic areas of life.

The concept of discrimination has emerged as one of the manifestations of violence. Experts have attributed the spread of discrimination in the Syrian ecosystem to economic factors and socially constructed gender roles, which have led to inequality between women and men in various life, practical, economic, and political practices. As a result, these different types of discrimination lead to different patterns of VAWG. To illustrate, an expert elaborated that in times of economic restrictions, there is a preference for caring for sons over daughters, as sons are often seen as the future breadwinners of the family. Within the patriarchal social ecosystem, women are typically confined to their “biological” duties of childbearing and are discouraged from pursuing careers or personal development. Such a society thus prioritises the education of males, because they will later support the family, while females are often confined to traditional domestic roles, particularly to work in the kitchen.

Defining the role of men as breadwinners is a basic principle of discrimination, as it results in the neglect of women’s equal rights. This can be observed in something as simple as providing unequal amounts of food to women compared to men. An expert mentioned the same






phenomenon among some families in Damascus. As the economic conditions of these families worsened and with the man being the only breadwinner, the wife would set aside the largest portion of meat for him to eat after work.

### **VAWG entrenched in the Syrian political system**

Discrimination extends beyond education and social practices. Society, the government, and economic powers collectively contribute to the gender-based discrimination experienced by Syrian women. This is evident in the denial of women's right to receive equal compensation for agricultural work on leased lands in North-East and North-West Syria, as well as in factories located in Damascus and its suburbs. Legal experts also highlight that the Syrian law, itself, is discriminatory, ranging from inheritance rules to divorce entitlements, marital property, and others.

The historical call for a male-dominated hierarchy that has persisted into modern times reinforces the dominant dimension of patriarchal authority, treating women as possessions of men. Representations of this dimension are integrated within all aspects of state-building, from laws to economics to society. This dimension is the main driver of VAWG and its diverse types, which vary across different social contexts. For instance, experts explained that violence in the form of deprivation of education and work is common in certain areas, such as in North-West Syria, while it is less common in Damascus and Salamiyah or As-Suwayda. Furthermore, religious factors also reinforce the concept of violence and all its different types. In As-Suwayda, for example, women are allowed to have an education and work, but at the same time, "honour crimes" persist, permitting the killing of women who marry outside their sect. An expert mentioned: "When a woman is killed because she married a person outside her sect, they are listed as honour cases in parenthesis." Another expert stated that: "In 2006, when an "honour crime" was committed in As-Suwayda, and some CSOs led a campaign to collect signatures to change the law and hold the criminal accountable as a murderer and not as an enraged man defending his honour. However, parents circumvented the situation by sending their underage sons to kill their daughters who married outside the sect, given that minors are granted reduced sentences, which all constituted a legal loophole." This incident proves that communal violence is entrenched, and the law in Syria has not tried to curb it, but rather preserves these communal and sectarian dynamics through special courts. To elaborate, Druze courts in As-Suwayda adhere to sectarian laws and handle cases related to honour killings within the governorate.



The issue is not limited to honour killings and the killing of women, but rather extends to the fact that the law does not protect women victims of harassment. This situation further perpetuates societal attitudes that are unsupportive of women who file lawsuits against harassers.


Harassment is not criminalised, but rather attributed to behavioural flaws. An expert actively involved in North- West Syria reported that if a woman is subjected to harassment or violence, she will find no centre or official entity to submit a complaint to, and if she files a claim before the local councils, they will find a way around the claim, especially if the harasser has ties with armed groups.

Several experts have observed that the social conditions for women in Syria were better in the 1950s and the beginning of 1960s than nowadays, as women enjoyed more freedoms and there was a women-led movement and active cultural forums seeking societal and religious enlightenment. However, with the change of the regime in Syria, a campaign of arrests took place alongside the dismantling of the women's movement. The most devastating blow came after the events of the 1980s with the emergence of the Brotherhood movement in Syria. This gave the regime the opportunity to suppress every active civil movement and appease the religious class by proliferating mosques and Islamic religious schools — supportive of the Assad regime. As such, any women-led civil movement was considered as a threat to religious movements and an offense to its conservative trends. In this way, the Syrian regime was able to impose its control and suppress civil movements, firstly through religion, and secondly, by claiming to combat imperialism. Consequently, this approach allowed the patriarchal mentality to further penetrate Syrian society and impose relevant habits and traditions, and it legally supported this mentality through discriminatory and gender-insensitive laws.

## Intersectionality

Violence based on religion and race have emerged as a new pattern of VAWG after the war. An expert in feminist activities in North-East Syria highlighted that Yazidi girls were abused because of their religion. These girls, being both female and Yazidi, became targets of violence. Another expert stated that some women also experience violence based on their ethnicity. Military groups deprived Kurds of their homes and confiscated their crops. This situation involves political factors as well as Kurds and Yazidis (both men and women) were not welcomed as Syrian citizens and faced discrimination in various state processes and institutions. This discrimination extended from schools and military service to acquiring Syrian nationality and identity, and even to speaking in their mother tongue. This entanglement of religion, politics, violence, and discrimination hinders the Syrian social fabric as well as the relationship between men and women.

There is strong correlation between religion and community in Syria, to the point where it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. An expert who also serves as the director of an organisation focused on women's affairs in North-West Syria talked about how difficult it is to convince





women and men in refugee camps to limit reproduction, especially given their poor living conditions. This is because current religious figures do not allow birth control and strictly forbid abortion. Even if a woman wants to take birth control pills, she will face resistance from her husband, who will resort to citing the fatwas issued by Sheikhs. In such cases, women can no longer object because the man has the right to discipline them, relying on the interpretation of Qur'anic text that allows beating women (Surat An-Nisa, verse 34). Another problem here is that women lack sufficient awareness regarding their right to be free from experiencing violence. A media and women's protection expert said in this regard: "There is a girl who came to us with traces of beating on her face. I called her mother to inquire about the girl's situation at home, and the mother answered that the girl's father had asked his daughter for a cup of water, but she was late to bring it to him, so he hit her, which was normal."

The right of men in Syria to discipline women is not limited to beating a woman if she neglects her duties at home or disobeys him. Rather, it is tied to the concept of authority and guardianship, which is emphasised in religious beliefs. Although interpretations differ regarding this principle, it is a common understanding that the man, regardless of his moral, mental, physical, or economic standing, has the final say in affairs concerning women related to him by kinship or marriage. This practice transcends most societal groups and is not exclusive to illiterate or less liberal social groups. It is believed that if a religious man abandons his role as guardian, as consecrated in the Qur'an, he abandons a sacred duty and may face social consequences like bullying, ostracism, or stigmatisation. At the same time, less religious men exploit the harshness of society and their fears that their daughters, wives, and sisters might experience harassment in public places as a pretext to justify restricting women's movements for their perceived protection. In addition, according to most of the experts interviewed, men have historically felt possessive about the women in their lives, a tendency that predates Islam. Although there are religious texts that emphasise the rights of women to choose, work, learn, and select their partners, these texts seem to be overlooked in favour of adhering to fatwas regarding men's right to exercise guardianship over women, define their limits, and control their movements according to his own views and not religion.

A political activist and expert in women's affairs mentioned that: "A man may allow a woman to work if he needs help in supporting the family, but under the terms he sees fit. For example, she may be allowed to work as a teacher in an all-girls school or as a caregiver in a nursery because such professions do not threaten his possession, but she may not be allowed to work in a factory among men, as it is too threatening."

The same expert also observed that men often view their wives, more so than their sisters, as part of their possessions, and so they are stricter with them.





Such concepts are reflected in drama, the media, and educational curricula, and according to experts, many current drama series perpetuate VAWG by insulting women and using offensive words. An expert in educational curricula and teaching criticised the Syrian educational curricula by stating: “When a child reads ‘Mom cooks and Dad goes to work,’ we are profiling a woman’s existence and defining her role in the child’s mind.” Another expert highlighted the role of popular proverbs in reinforcing violence, especially proverbs that jokingly or habitually belittle or humiliate women.

In summary, the discussions among experts underscored that the various types, extent, and causes of VAWG might seem to reinforce patriarchal authority on the surface. However, in practice, it effectively supports the entrenchment of the existing dictatorial regime in Syria, perpetuating social instability and keeping society trapped in binary conflicts between the strong and the weak, such as man vs. woman, rich vs. poor, employer vs. employee, and political, military, or intelligence authorities vs. citizen. This results in distorted intellectual structures marred by corruption and the inability to overcome individual grievances and interests. This hinders the development of advanced social and governmental institutions and concepts of citizenship based on justice and equal opportunities, ultimately hindering the goal of building a stable, secure, and just homeland for all.

### **6.2.2 VAWG PREVALENCE AND ITS LINK WITH THE ARMED CONFLICT IN SYRIA**

**“Sexual exploitation existed before the war, but it naturally exacerbated after, for instance because of pressure, the economic situation, relocation, displacement (...). The most serious risk emerging is that sexual exploitation increased at a time when the mechanisms to combat it weakened, whether through legal or societal and communal mechanisms. Prior to the war, for example, the trafficking of women and girls existed, but as it became a widespread phenomenon with the start of the war, we could no longer limit or contain it, neither through state efforts, nor through the work of organisations and the civil society, among others.”** – Legal expert who was part of the community that drafted the Syrian Law to Combat Human Trafficking Crimes.

VAWG in the Middle East follows similar patterns, but the war in Syria introduced additional complexities. On one hand, it led to an increase in the frequency of VAWG, and on the other hand, it led to the emergence of new types of violence that had not been present before.

Experts confirmed the suffering of refugee women in light of economic conditions and legal discrimination. This is especially pronounced as many men in Syria are taking part in fighting, enrolling in military services in regime-controlled areas, fleeing the regime, leaving the country, or



being arrested. Experts also reported many causes and forms of VAWG which are linked to the war, or which have been exacerbated as a result of it, as follows:

- **Displacement itself is a factor of VAWG:** Displacement in general is a type of coercion and violence resulting from war. It is a form of violence for both men and women, as well as children but it has specific motives, features and consequences for women. Displacement is often accompanied with the challenge of sheltering displaced women. The causes of this problem are many, including that displaced women do not know the actual cost of housing and are subject to exploitation by tenants who manipulate rent prices. In addition, most of the displaced women don't hold the identification papers needed to formalise official rent contracts, so they live in houses without a roof or unequipped for a healthy and secure residence period. Experts said there are many displaced women live with their children unroofed houses. These houses have no doors or windows to protect their children from weather conditions or criminals.

- **Societal discrimination against women in general and displaced/refugee women in particular:** Cases of harassment against refugee women have been mentioned by the experts. One expert in the As-Suwayda region referred to cases of sexual blackmail of displaced women by an international organisation relief distributor: "Displaced women are often viewed as more vulnerable with no one to defend them, and this view is shared even by service providers and male staff members of an international humanitarian organisation. Gas service providers, for instance, belong to political parties, and they take advantage of the fact that displaced women are in need. We have documented cases of gas service providers harassing displaced women, especially as they know there is no one to protect them." The situation is not much better for local women. They face discrimination as well, especially if they are known to have lost their husbands during the war and have no one to protect them. Widows of forced-conscripts in regime-controlled coastal areas have been forced into sextortion in order to receive their shares of aid. An expert concerned with widow affairs stated: "The women who lost their men in the war are subjected to physical and sexual violence. In order to secure certain basic needs, they seek institutions for a food basket or aid, where they also face the risk of being exposed to sexual harassment and blackmail, and there are some women who have submitted to these practices just to receive a food basket for their children. This had never been the case in coastal areas of Syria before the war." According to the observers, women's vulnerability to such practices of sexual harassment and sextortion by aid workers or service providers often increases when they do not live within a family or marriage.

- **Lack of a safe, fair, and non-discriminatory workplace environment in Syria:** This led to many violations of women's equal rights in terms of

low wages, blackmail, and harsh work environments that do not take into consideration the health conditions of women, such as pregnancy or menstruation. Displaced women bear double the burden because displacement imposes on them work patterns they are not used to and do not want but have to agree to because of their dire living conditions, economic situation, and displacement requirements. Areas in North-West Syria, which are not under regime control, have welcomed huge numbers of displaced people from all over the country, and these people have settled in camps or houses in Idlib, Afrin, Ma'arat Misrin, Kafar Takharim, A'azaz, Rihaniya, and other locations. These areas often rely on agriculture, and working in fields has thus become a job opportunity for displaced women and girls. However, landowners exploit displaced women by paying them low wages and not taking into consideration their health conditions and needs.

One expert and women's rights advocate in these areas said that her organisation trained women who work in agricultural lands to form a committee and elect a representative to voice all their demands, but this was of no use, as there is no entity to which the representative can file a complaint. The expert explained that if a woman does not show up to work for a health reason, she loses her chance to work because the landowner can directly replace her with someone else. If women go on strike to protest low wages, the landowner will recruit women from camps in the North, along the Syria-Turkey border, who will accept work with wages even lower than those of new displaced women and certainly lower than the wages of the local inhabitants. The situation is not any better in regime-controlled areas. One expert, who works on supporting women in Rif Dimashq, particularly in Jaramana which hosts a large number of displaced people from Eastern Ghouta, said: "Displaced women work in sewing factories or factories that produce cleaning products, but they suffer from discrimination in wages as compared to men. The factory owner justifies the discrimination by saying that they are not of equal physical strength to men, and they cannot do the same work their male counterparts do. In addition, as they are displaced women, they do not have social security, or workplace life or health insurance, so they do not receive any other form of compensation." In reality, factory owners exploit displaced women's need for work to avoid signing any contract with them in the first place.

- **Discriminatory laws against women with regard to guardianship, custody of their children and inheritance:** These family related legal provisions constitute another form of VAWG. The disappearance, arrest, or death of the father makes it difficult for women to obtain the official documents needed to continue the education of their children, and women find themselves unable to travel with her children without the consent of the grandfather or paternal uncle. Consequently, these discriminatory laws subject women to both the violence of legal regulations and the violence of life circumstances, forcing them to





navigate complex official processes, paperwork, and documentation they may not have been prepared for. Discriminatory laws also affect women regarding the issue of inheritance. As widows returned to their villages and towns to renovate or sell their houses, they faced challenges when dividing the inheritance because the parents of the deceased husbands often claim ownership of the property and guardianship over their grandchildren's inheritance. They often refuse to give their daughters-in-law their rights, exploiting the women's lack of knowledge regarding their rights and official transactions and processes.

- **Forced marriage of children and women:** Forced marriage became common due to the lack of security, the proliferation of armed groups, and the absence of effective laws. These factors have left fathers and mothers feeling incapable of protecting their daughters, leading them to arrange early marriages as a way to place their daughters under the protection of another man. This means that these girls – children and teens – have been forced to abandon their education and start families forcefully and without full knowledge of the implications. In areas of North-West Syria, outside the control of the regime, two experts who were interviewed discussed this alarming increase in forced marriages, which has unfortunately become normalised. Parents wait until their daughter's first menstruation and rush to have her married. This is a common form of violence against the child, depriving her not only of her childhood and her right to education, but also subjecting her to sexual violence. Parents justify their daughters' early marriage by citing security concerns or poverty, suggesting that their daughters will find better food in her husband's home than in their own. Forced marriage is not limited to young girls but also affects adult women who were forcibly displaced from regime-controlled areas, such as the Douma and Eastern Ghouta in Damascus. These women left their hometowns after losing their husbands during the war, due to fighting against the regime, arrests or death. They arrived on buses known as "Green Buses" to areas in North-West Syria, bringing with them nothing but their children and their poverty. Their conditions forced them to re-marry, and they often become their husbands' second or third wives. An expert who works in Aleppo's countryside (Rif Halab) said she receives numerous complaints of marital violence from these women, but they cannot withdraw from their marriage and ask for divorce because they have nowhere to go and no community to protect them; they are strangers in a host community that, basically, does not have the legal framework to support women. The expert explained that in non-regime-controlled areas in North-West Syria, there is no system to protect women against violence, and the area still relies on social and family authority for women's protection. The social and familial authority system is an internal system in which the father protects his own daughter. If the daughter is subjected to marital violence, the

father uses his own ways to stop the violence, often through threatening or beating the husband. However, if the abused woman is a displaced woman, she will be considered a stranger who does not belong to the social and familial authority system in the area. No one intervenes to protect her. Forced marriage, for both children and adults, highlights the social and familial disruptions in Syrian society, characterised by an imbalance of power within the family, coercion, ignorance of the responsibilities.

- **Violation of official marriage:** Right to enter into official marriage contracts and register them in State centres for family affairs is being violated. One expert gave an example from the As-Suwayda governorate, where there are many young men wanted for military service. Whenever one of them expresses his wish to get married and goes to court to register the marriage, he is arrested and handed to the Syrian regime to forcibly join the military service. These young men have thus resorted to informal oral customary marriages facilitated by Druze sheikhs. However, this is a dangerous practice given that these marriages are not registered. In such cases, the wife often waits for her first child to be born to file a kinship case and secure her child's future right to enrol in school.

- **Lack of communication between ruling authorities in Syria with regard to civil and judicial records.** This results in increased insecurity and lawlessness. When names of individuals wanted for smuggling and trafficking of women and children are not circulated among different regions, it becomes easier for criminals to commit crimes in one area and then move to another which falls under the jurisdiction of another authority without being held accountable. One expert and activist that works in several Syrian areas added that women in North-East and North-West Syria can file for divorce before the Kurdish Autonomous Administration or the local councils supported by Turkish rule, and they may be granted the divorce. However, they will still be registered as married in the civil registry of the Syrian state. Even more concerning, they can re-marry and have children while they are still registered under their ex-husband's records.

- **Exploitation of women in drug abuse and trade:** These have emerged as new factors contributing to heightened risks for women and raise in femicides. One expert also reported that the expansion of the drug trade in As-Suwayda has resulted in the recruitment of women and girls to distribute drugs. They are often targeted due to their financial needs or manipulated emotionally, and they may subsequently be blackmailed through threats to expose their involvement and ruin their reputation.

- **Restrictions on women in the public places:** Extremist religious movements have spread throughout the country. Extremist movements in Syria enforce strict guardianship over women when using public or private transportation, as they are not allowed to go out without a guardian,

typically their brother, husband, or father. These extremist practices in some areas in North-East and North-West Syria reinforce men's authority over women, as men are punished if the girls and women in their house do not abide by the rules of the local authority.

• **Exploitation, sexual abuse, and trafficking of women and girls:** These forms have increased since the inception of the conflict – although existing before – due to economic pressure, displacement, and relocation. This is ever more dangerous with weak legal and social mechanisms to combat these practices. Moreover, the judiciary is almost absent, and even if a sentence is issued, there are no means to ensure enforcement. The police in regime-controlled areas, for example, find themselves incapable of arresting a person for a crime of VAWG, and the same applies in other areas as well. This neglect of women's rights is evident as lawsuits regarding femicides have not resulted in any sentences issued up to this point. One legal expert who participated in the drafting of the Syrian Law to Combat Human Trafficking Crimes explained: “Sexual exploitation was present before the war, but it naturally exacerbated after, for instance because of pressure, the economic situation, relocation, displacement, and all that. The most serious risk emerging is that sexual exploitation increased at a time when the mechanisms to combat it weakened, whether through legal or societal and communal mechanisms. Prior to the war, for example, the trafficking of women and girls existed, but as it became a widespread phenomenon with the start of the war, we could no longer limit or contain it, neither through state efforts, nor through the work of organisations and the civil society, among others.”

• **Using women's bodies as weapons in war:** One legal expert and lawyer reported that there are cases where women are raped, kidnapped, or threatened by one warring faction as a means to restrain or subjugate another warring faction by threatening the honour of its men. This practice has become widespread since the start of anti-regime protests in Syria, where women were arrested, raped, and stripped naked in front of investigators and soldiers. Arrests extended beyond the women who actively took part in the movement and protests. Even the female relatives of men associated with the opposition or protestors (or perceived as such) were targeted, as forces would forcefully enter their houses and arrest the women they found at home. This strategy was employed as a means to exert pressure on Syrians to refrain from protesting and demonstrating any form of opposition against the regime.

• **Domestic violence:** Psychological pressures experienced by all Syrians, and particularly by men who feel incapable of providing for their families' daily needs, have intensified the factors contributing to physical and psychological violence against women, girls, and children.

• **Cyberviolence and blackmail through social media** have increased after the war due to weakness of governmental authorities that can enforce the laws. This is also especially true in the absence of criminalisation procedures and due to the fear of women and girls to file complaints


against blackmailers. One of the interviewed experts attributes the increase in cyberviolence cases to the fact that people stayed at home for prolonged periods due to war and then Covid-19 and cholera. Throughout this period, communication via social media increased. Although there have been some civil initiatives, such as those implemented along the Syrian coast, aimed at helping women who were victims of cyber blackmail through hacking blackmailers' accounts, they remain insufficient to effectively address the situation.

- **Abuse of the most vulnerable women:** Experts repeatedly reported the negative impact of war on various marginalised groups of women, including displaced women, women with disabilities, divorced and widowed women, former detainees, women living in poverty, and illiterate women.

- **Violence against women and girls with disabilities:** Experts mentioned that women and girls with disabilities are among the groups most vulnerable to VAWG, not just because of their impairment, but because their families and communities refuse this condition. Some families feel ashamed and disgraced if society knows they have a girl with a disability because it means that there is a flaw in the family genes, an assumption that would lead to the rejection of her siblings as well and would prevent them from getting married. They also feel ashamed if anyone sees their daughter with disabilities, for instance when she is sick or eating food. That is why many families try to hide their daughters with disabilities. Absence of inclusive, personalised support further increases exclusion. One expert mentioned that she came across a mother of girls with disabilities who worked hard, before the war, as a housemaid to buy wheelchairs for them and provide for them. However, a missile destroyed their house and the wheelchairs and displaced the mom and her three girls. The expert added: "There is no sufficient support for this group, neither 'before the war' nor 'after the war'".

- **Violence against divorced and widowed women:** These women experience social violence in terms of ostracism, harassment, and physical blackmail by men in the workplace. The cycle of violence in Syria led to the establishment of camps for widowed women in North-West Syria. One expert talked about how some women in these camps experience physical violence, ostracism, and economic violence just because they have nowhere else to go to. Additionally, a challenging condition for these women is that the widows' camps often require them to part with their sons when they reach the age of 12. If they refuse, they are forced to leave the camp too. This makes these places a source of additional violence on women. Hence, some experts recommended that male children should remain with their mothers until the age of 18 years.

- **Violence against women detainees:** Many media articles and reports have raised the issue of the plight of female political detainees who have survived. Experts point out that these detainees were subjected to injustice twice: first, when they were arrested in violation of their freedom



of expression and second, when they were released and ostracised by their family – parents and husbands – and their communities who view the mere possibility that they might have been subjected to rape by investigators in prison as a sufficient reason to accuse them of marring the honour of their families or husbands. In several cases, they are divorced by their husbands and forbidden from seeing their children, or even face threats of being killed.

Those factors of vulnerability add on each other. One legal expert pointed out that if a woman is both displaced and falls into categories such as being divorced, widowed, with a disability, or orphaned, her vulnerability increases. The most vulnerable women are displaced women who are unaccompanied by a man. They suffer on the procedural level as well: when the smart card was imposed on Syrian citizens, displaced women who lived alone had no share of the cards because they did not have a male sponsor.

### **6.2.3 NATIONAL LAWS AND INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

The regime in Syria has mobilised all State components to achieve one goal- ensuring the regime's continued control over the country. The law constitutes the most important tool in asserting this control, whether in terms of finding legal texts that support and strengthen the patriarchal system in the Syrian society or imposing legal texts that prevent freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, and political spaces for partisan, intellectual, or cultural opposition forces. Given that the same political system has existed in Syria for more than fifty years, it has created a social fabric and intellectual structure that accept and allow violent and discriminatory practices under judicial and legal pretexts. This includes practices such as "honour killings", which responds to Syrian societal and familial structures, or not giving women and girls inheritance, which is considered a practice that protects family possessions solely entrusted to the man's authority and guardianship. This is particularly evident due to the fact that the same authoritarian tools used by the Syrian regime in women's affairs are used and widespread in areas that fall outside regime control, under the control of Turkish-supported forces, or under the rule of the Kurdish Democratic Party in the Autonomous Administration.

**"Although an advanced and modern law was established in the Autonomous Administration administered by the Kurdish Democratic Party and Syrian Democratic Party in North-East Syria, and although this law recognises equality between men and women and their cooperation and participation, whether at home, work, or in positions of decision-making, nothing has changed in terms of implementation on the ground. One of the reasons for that is the societal mentality that has remained unchanged despite the change of law."** – An expert, activist, and media professional in North-East Syria.

Experts also pointed out significant shortcomings in laws and legislations that support and enforce the international agreements the Syrian government has concluded to combat VAWG. For instance, Syria has ratified the CEDAW, but has maintained reservations on several of its articles, which makes the agreement void for the country. Even the ratified articles of CEDAW are not implemented so that the national laws are harmonised with them. The government, in reality, does not truly implement anything except what suits its agenda, but it is keen on carefully drafting government reports to please the international community and appear committed. With regard to the agreement's effectiveness, experts report two reasons that make it devoid of substance: first, the Syrian Constitution does not stipulate the need to implement internationally agreed-upon agreements and conventions, and second, international agreements are not integrated into national legislation. This makes concluding international agreements with Syria of no value. One expert in Syrian legal affairs commented: "Syria has joined the Convention on Unorganised Crime, for example, but a judge cannot implement this convention without a law. We were able to recently draft a law on trafficking, and since then, judges have been obligated to apply the law."

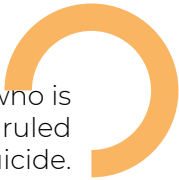
With regard to national laws in the Syrian government, there is no special and comprehensive law to combat, prevent, and provide protection from all aspects of VAWG and hold the perpetrators accountable. Furthermore, there are no legal texts addressing domestic violence. One legal expert mentioned that he worked with a group of human rights experts and jurists in order to write a draft law on protection from domestic violence, covering anything from filing complaints to establishing penalties. This draft law was then proposed before the People's Assembly in Syria, but was not approved. The expert added: "We have been trying for a year, in our capacities as lawyers and through the Bar Association, to expand the framework of this draft law to include combatting all forms of violence against women, inside or outside their households, but there seems to be no response to the proposed change. We are now thinking of launching an advocacy campaign by organising workshops delivered by journalists and media professionals." Another expert recounted that when she brought up the issue of gender-bias in the Syrian Constitution during her participation in a meeting regarding the Constitution, she was attacked by other participants who were apprehensive to discuss feminist, gender, and women's rights issues. She comments: "It was as if we were disrupting the momentum of the revolution by talking about women's issues."

The situation is not any better in the areas under the control of Turkish-supported forces or Autonomous Administration areas, where there is no comprehensive Constitution or laws, and therefore, no laws protecting women and girls in the first place.

As for the Autonomous Administration, it adopted laws in line with human rights and women's rights, but there is no real implementation, and they are often circumvented by the same authorities that issued them or by individuals who are not convinced of gender equality.

Experts also pointed out that the Syrian Personal Status Laws, enforced by the Syrian government courts, do not protect women nor their rights, but instead contribute to violating these rights. The Personal Status Laws consecrate the concept of social and religious guardianship, which stipulates the duty of men to financially support women and the duty of women to obey. This affects women's rights on several levels, starting with women's right to work. The Labour Law guarantees women's right to choose work; however, practically, she is forced to join her husband in his place of residence, even if it is economically detrimental. Refusal to comply may grant the husband the unilateral right to seek divorce without receiving enough alimony for herself or the children in her custody..

The issue of inheritance is also related to the concept of guardianship, in the sense that the breadwinner (male) has priority in inheritance rulings in Druze and Islamic courts. Only Christian courts treat women fairly and consider them equal heirs to men. As such, the Syrian law has preserved the principle of male guardianship among Muslims and Druze. This is because the inheritance system of Muslims follows the Islamic Sharia. The male has twice the share of females. In contrast, the Druze system follows the Druze court, which fully upholds the right of the testator to make a will, as specified in Article 308 of the Personal Status Law for the Druze sect. The Druze community customarily gives inheritance only to the males in the family. An expert from As-Suwayda explains that Druze women receive, as a share of inheritance, what is known as a "chamber of locked-ups" (Ghurfat Al-Maqati'). The "chamber of locked-ups" is the woman's right to temporary residence in the case of divorce or the death of her husband. The right lasts until the woman's own death or departure. However, the woman has no right to own this place of residence, rent it, or pass it on to her children. Furthermore, guardianship in the Syrian law is reserved for men. A woman cannot travel with her children or give her daughters for marriage without the permission of her husband, and in case of his death, the consent of her father-in-law or brother-in-law must be given. This law was recently amended to stipulate that the father, too, must obtain the consent of the mother to travel with his children without her. The right to guardianship also includes the right to child custody in cases of divorce. Although the Personal Status Law has raised the age for child custody to 15 years, it is conditional on the mother not re-marrying, otherwise custody will be transferred to the father. This does not apply if the father re-marries, for he will still have child custody. In addition, Article 548 of the 1949 Syrian Penal Code had reduced the sentence for "honour" killings, thus perpetuating the culture of killing women and girls who disobey their parents in choosing a husband or who have an extramarital relationship or affair. Although a decision was issued in 2020 cancelling Article 548, the culture of killing women is still widespread, as people still



use two ways to circumvent this article: they either have a brother who is still a minor do the killing, knowing that as a juvenile, he will only be ruled a reduced sentence, or they claim the woman or girl committed suicide. Furthermore, some judges resort to articles 192 and 242 to reduce the sentence for the crime.

Moreover, with respect to the marriage of minors, the new amendment of the Personal Status Law criminalises the marriage of minors under the age of 18. However, this practice persists as a result of the “discretionary” power of the judge and marriages conducted outside official courts. This has promoted a culture of pushing girls towards marriage as soon as they reach puberty and has made it socially acceptable and widespread, especially in non-regime-controlled areas and refugee camps in North Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon.

It is evident that any international initiative to reach agreements with the Syrian government in conformity with the international systems to protect women and girls is futile. This is due to two main barriers identified in this study. First, there is a lack of political will within the regime to protect women and girls from VAWG. This is often justified under the pretext of respecting the patriarchal, societal, and religious authorities in Syria, to avoid causing further resentment against the regime. To this end, many experts agree that the lack of political will is the primary barrier.

The second barrier is widespread corruption among judiciary and executive authorities. Experts report that even if women file a complaint against their abuser or rapist, the lawsuit can be circumvented. Additionally, women may experience significant social and economic consequences for filing a complaint, including divorce, losing custody of their children, no right to marital property and thus no residence for the woman and her children, and no financial support for the woman to provide for her children.

#### **6.2.4 SERVICES PROVIDED FOR WOMEN VICTIMS OF VAWG**

The legal sphere, which disregards justice standards regarding the rights of women and girls, is coupled with the absence of guaranteed protection from violence and the lack of support and empowerment services provided to women and girls. Some experts reported that the government almost completely abandons its societal responsibility towards women and children. This is not limited to the conflict period. On the contrary, the war has led to the emergence of licensed and unlicensed CSOs that are trying to provide support and empowerment programmes for women, funded by international organisations. However, such organisations lack stability and security, especially those who are unlicensed and do not operate in accordance with the regime’s political agenda, which results in limited or non-existent communication channels between CSOs and the government. With regard to engagement with the government sector, an economic expert and activist in relief and women’s empowerment in Jaramana explained that it is possible to engage with the government



sector, but it lacks reliability and suffers from deep corruption. However, the expert highlighted the effectiveness of cooperation with medical dispensaries that cooperate with CSOs through networking, providing health care, raising health awareness, and providing education. She added that “many CSOs prefer not to deal with the government sector, based on the government’s political position and to avoid being considered regime loyalists.” Nevertheless, unlicensed organisations still play a positive role in organising awareness workshops for women about Syrian law, official documents and paperwork, civil records, and in appointing lawyers for women to provide legal advice in cases of violence and divorce.

There are cooperation mechanisms established by members of Whole of Syria Network (WoS) and Gender Based Violence (sub-clusters) which is comprised of UN, INGO, Syrian CSOs and government agencies. Members of WoS developed coordination mechanisms including policy documents, regulatory tool, and referral pathways. However, Collaboration appears to be limited to the government and licensed CSOs, i.e., the institutions that operate under a license from Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MSAL) and cooperate with the Syrian Commission for Development (SCD) and SCFAP, which are affiliated with the Ministry. Therefore, in their work with regime-controlled entities, licensed organisations are bound to implement and abide by the regime’s agendas. Even though this organisation is not political or opposed to the Syrian regime, but rather aims at supporting women and girls, its activities are still considered undesirable and even unwelcome.

The regime not only refrains from supporting unlicensed organisations and associations, but also actively opposes them, according to a human rights expert and activist from As-Suwayda. The expert explained: “CSOs in As-Suwayda are not licensed. This gives the regime a cause to reject, boycott and fight the work of civil society in the governorate. In 2018, MSAL issued a decision that prohibits any cooperation with CSOs in As-Suwayda to fight violence against women, excluding cooperation with the Syria Trust for Development, an NGO established by Asma al-Assad and licensed by the regime. Any lawyer in As-Suwayda proven to have cooperated with CSOs in defending women on a voluntary basis is held accountable and prosecuted at the Syrian Bar Association.”

It is self-evident that establishing and supporting safe shelters for women and girls who are victims of VAWG is crucial, especially in the context of a patriarchal society that supports authoritarianism. However, this is not the case in all Syrian regions. Shelters are scarce and not properly distributed geographically. Additionally, the shelters’ staff are not trained and do not have sufficient capacity to deal with women victims of VAWG based on a victim sensitive approach. Experts reported that there are only four shelters in regime-controlled areas. The first is located in the Rif Dimashq, but because it is well-known and widely accessible, it does not guarantee the safety of women there. Two other shelters are established



by the religious order The Congregation of Our Lady of Charity and the Good Centre, and, the fourth shelter is the Oasis of Hope Centre, which was recently established to welcome a maximum of 30 women. MSAL has praised this centre and suggested it could contribute to the decline of VAWG in Syria. However, one of the experts reported: "The shelter was established according to international standards but is designated for women recommended by the Syrian regime, thus it is dedicated for a specific and defined category."

All these centres are located in Damascus, making it difficult for abused women in other governorates to reach and access them. An activist and expert affirmed: "There is no government support in As-Suwayda for divorced or abused women; we refer cases of abused women in our area to the centres in Damascus." The situation is very similar in North-East Syria. According to an expert, women there do not receive any kind of support from any of the ruling authorities. For instance, the de-facto authorities supported by Turkey, operating in the region under their control, focus on infrastructure, urbanisation, establishing gardens and public spaces, and promoting Turkish culture through cultural centres. Meanwhile, de-facto authorities under the Autonomous Administration try to improve some economic affairs and sometimes support specific activities in the educational sector with the aim of promoting the ideas that they wish to mainstream in the sector. An expert active in these regions added that CSOs find themselves incapable of addressing cases of violence when the perpetrator has connections with the ruling authorities, whether religious or military. The most these organisations can do in such instances is refer the case of abuse to international and local organisations that can coordinate with and pressure the relevant authorities. The expert said: "As a member of a local organisation, if I file a complaint against a member of authority, I would likely be ignored, or I may even personally face abuse by the authority before which I present the complaint."

The Jinwar Women's Village was established in North- East Syria, under the Autonomous Administration. It is a village comprising fifty residential, administrative, educational, and health buildings. According to the expert who spoke about Jinwar, the village is home to 24 women who are either victims of abuse or widows of former militants, along with their children. However, there are still no women's shelters which are not widely known or have hidden addresses, which means that they do not offer complete safety.

Regarding the help hotline, it was established in Damascus only for cases of emergency, following the abuse incident that led to the death of a woman in Damascus by the hands of her husband and his family. This incident became known as the Story of Ayat Al-Rifai. However, communication through this hotline is complicated, as it has not been well introduced to the people. Meanwhile, an expert in the regime-controlled coastal regions said that the rise in cyberviolence crimes

prompted a group of young men to establish a civil initiative similar to a hotline. Through this initiative, women and girls can report cases of online blackmail or violence, and the young men help them by shutting down the online accounts of the abuser.

## 6.2.5 WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

The Syrian war has led to the emergence of two issues that have contributed to increased women's participation in the labour market. First, men became absent, with many joining the fighting fronts, dying, or getting arrested. Second, the economic situation has deteriorated, as elaborated in the [World Bank's report](#)<sup>(25)</sup>. The Syrian pound has plummeted to a record low and Syria has become one of the countries with the highest poverty rates in the MENA region. This is confirmed by experts' observations, which reported that the high poverty rate has forced the males of the family to accept women's labour. In addition, women are compelled to become breadwinners in cases of the loss of the male breadwinner or the displacement of the woman. An academic expert said that before the war, she had never seen a girl working as a waitress in a restaurant or café. This has become common today. Girls and women are even working at gas stations or as truck drivers, i.e. in professions that have always been reserved for males in Syrian society. This was also confirmed by another expert working in the media: "I see that many women who were housewives are getting jobs to help earn a livelihood. They are engaging in fields of work that were uncommon, such as taxi driving and transportation, while others are running the sewing workshops that belonged to their missing or lost husbands. I met displaced women who do not want to return to their regions for fear of being reframed in their previous roles, as the areas of displacement in which they are living are more open."

Although the increase in women's job experience is one of the positive outcomes of the war, the legal situation surrounding women's labour, which does not facilitate women's employment in the first place, has turned this experience into a challenge that exposes women to many practices of violence. Workplaces in Syria lack codes of conduct and periodic or regular assessments that examine the presence of safe spaces for women or girls to ensure that they do not face physical blackmail or wage exploitation. In light of the deteriorating economic situation and their need for work, women often remain silent, especially when working in factories and private workplaces without registered contracts. Thus, their work is not registered at MSAL. Due to the context of conflict, women's need for work has been and continues to be more vulnerable to being exploited, leading them to work without formal contracts and

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(25) The toll of war: the economic and social consequences of war in Syria, World Bank, at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria>

for low wages. In cases of violence or harassment, women lack adequate protection to file complaints and they do not receive any compensation; rather, they are often dismissed from their employment.

**“Before working in law, I worked as a Human Resources Manager in a large group of companies. It was quite evident that when the company hired a woman, it took into account that she would give birth, get sick, and have her period. Therefore, the company’s strategy to cater for all that was to offer women wages lower than men’s. Moreover, employers believed that men were the breadwinners, while women only provided support, and therefore it was not necessary for them to receive wages similar to men’s wages.”** - Said an expert working in law

From the perspective of Syrian law, equality is supposed to be upheld for women in terms of wages, except in the case of life insurance: if the husband dies, his wife receives a pension that is less than what the husband’s share would be if his wife dies. However, in practice, wages vary for women in the private Syrian labour market.

It is clear that the Syrian law overlooks women farmers. In Syria, the agricultural system works based on family units, i.e., all family members work in cultivating the father’s land. After the Baath Party took power in Syria, it sought to divide the various work activities in Syria into unions and federations to ensure coordination of the working groups, each in its specialty. All farmers in Syria are registered in the so-called “General Union of Peasants.” However, the registration law only requires the registration of the father, who owns the land, and not of all the family members working with him on the land. As such, compensation and insurance are exclusively granted to the father. The absence of women farmers from state records has also caused them to be overlooked in the peasant family labour system. Although women work equally to men in agriculture, from watering to harvesting and selling agricultural products, if they get sick or injured at work, they do not receive treatment or compensation because they are not granted health insurance from the General Union of Peasants. The predominant patriarchal system in Syria is particularly evident in labour laws, especially in terms of agriculture, and it also denies women’s rights to land. This patriarchal system does not pay women enough for their work on the land, nor does it consider them partners in marital property in the event of divorce. Women are expected to simultaneously be responsible for procreation, breastfeeding, house cleaning, and cooking without any compensation.

In regions where tribes have shifted from a nomadic lifestyle to an agricultural lifestyle, a model that violates women’s rights and humanity has emerged. This model combines both Bedouin and agricultural patriarchy, leading to a situation where women effectively experience characteristics akin to slavery. An expert on Syrian society explained that in these Bedouin agricultural communities, wives work on the land without getting paid. Instead, the money earned is collected to organise a second



or third marriage for the Bedouin farmer. Two reasons underpin this mentality. The first reason is tribal, with the aim of encouraging frequent childbearing for the sake of the tribe's power, making polygamy accepted and required at the social, familial, and tribal levels to bolster the clan's strength and power. The tribesmen's desire for strength and power is further reinforced by the absence of the concept of state, citizenship, and law among these clans. The Syrian regime fails to promote the concept of citizenship; rather, it often seeks to promote tribal belonging among the residents of these regions through political allocations and government services. The second reason is economic, as polygamy and frequent childbearing provide additional free labour for fathers working on the land. In such regions, the agricultural system transforms into a severe type of economic injustice against women, in addition to socially depriving them of inheritance under the pretext of keeping land ownership in the hands of males who carry the family name. Over time and in the absence of legal formulas and institutional initiatives to address this issue, women have become unpaid workers in both their homes and on the agricultural land. Furthermore, if these women are subjected to gender-based violence and demand divorce, they do not receive any share of marital property. Instead, they return to their families, after having exhausted their lives and bodies without any resources to live off for the rest of their lives.

Meanwhile, when women work as harvesters and agricultural workers on lands that do not belong to their husbands, they receive low wages, do not benefit from health insurance, and work in poor conditions, as noted by an expert in North-East Syria. Agriculture work does not require the formalisation of employment contracts between female workers and landowners, and their labour is not registered at the local councils or any other authority in those regions. This means that women do not enjoy all their labour rights, and even encounter difficulties in submitting a complaint.

The situation of women living in large cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, especially those coming from families that work in trade and factories, is usually better. The urban environment they reside in socially and legally discourages male relatives from depriving them of their inheritance rights, or husbands from seizing their inheritance. This means that they have the ability to own property or businesses and manage them economically. However, for women who inherit or own land or businesses in regions far from the centres of these cities, they find themselves under the grip of a patriarchal system that limits the possibility of women to manage their property on their own. In this regard, an expert described the situation of women in North- East Syria as follows: "Women who own properties such as a land or a house are few. They appoint men to manage these properties, therefore, rare are the women who own businesses all by themselves."

In addition to the issues previously mentioned related to women's access to the labour market, Syrian women have limited presence in economic



representation. One expert discussed the economic representation aspect through her own experience as an economist who held a high administrative position in the Ministry of Economy in the Syrian government. She explained that few women hold government positions involving economic decision-making. Thus, women's struggles are not represented in the labour market, and there is an ongoing demand for services that facilitate their economic participation, such as childcare services, improved maternity leave conditions, and an increased presence of female workers in certain sectors. This gender-insensitivity in economic decision-making positions is prevalent throughout all regions in Syria, deepening the injustice faced by working Syrian women. It should also be noted that the compulsory education system in Syria has led to a considerable increase in the percentage of educated Syrian women. However, this progress is hindered by the lack of consideration for women's rights in Syrian law and the failure to provide safe spaces guaranteeing their rights and representation. The war has also led to additional abuse, violence, and poverty, leading to increased injustice that affects all women, both illiterate and educated.

#### **6.2.6 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS**

According to Carnegie Institute<sup>(26)</sup>, the lack of gender parity was evident during the August 2020 meeting of the Constitutional Committee – a United Nations-facilitated constituent assembly established to adopt a new Syrian Constitution as part of the peace process. Only thirteen of the forty-five-member drafting committee were women (29%). The committee failed to ensure equal representation of women. There were seven independent women in the civil society delegation, four women representing the regime, and two in the opposition's delegation. This lack of equal representation illustrates ideological resistance to women's meaningful participation, particularly in the Syrian regime and opposition. The lack of parity here, prevents women's effective participation and has led to superficial involvement in peace processes. In this context, women's presence in negotiating parties has primarily become an effort to appease the international community.

The failure of the regime and opposition to provide meaningful leadership opportunities to women is not surprising. Experts have indicated that women's political participation is low in the Syrian government and in political decision-making positions. There are only 11% female members in the People's Assembly, which is a very low percentage. For instance, there are only two female candidates for the largest electoral district – the Aleppo region – which has 32 deputies. Furthermore, there are only 3 female ministers, as opposed to 26 male ministers. This is due to the absence of a real electoral process and lack of partisan mechanisms to prepare women to enter the political field, likely stemming from the prevailing mentality that does not fully appreciate the importance of women's participation. There is indeed an integrated dynamic that limits women's work, presence, and status. According to several experts, even

when a woman holds a political position within the Syrian regime, it is merely to achieve a percentage of representation and create a false image of the country's openness. Consequently, the regime's system makes sure that women who are feminists or experienced in political affairs, in general, do not take on these positions. Rather, women who support the regime and are cleared at the security level are appointed within this system, not for their competence but for their loyalty to the Syrian political regime. One of the experts who tried to engage in political work inside Syria stated that: "As soon as the government saw that the international community supported women in the opposition, it quickly established and imposed women's groups and organisations representing women. However, when these groups and organisations addressed specific topics such as transitional justice, the government objected, and they were prevented from interfering in politics.»

While discussing the reasons underlying the weak political participation of women, an expert stated that the extent of women's participation in public affairs is primarily linked to the political situation. A legal expert mentioned that: "During the period of Syrian renaissance, from the end of the Ottoman occupation until the 70s, women largely participated in public affairs. However, after the 70s, with the oil wave in the Arab world as a whole, and the Salafist influence on the region, the political system shifted. Additionally, the emerging role of the Muslim Brotherhood undermined and diminished women's movements. The religious issue here is used as a cover at any given moment in order to implement a certain political plan."

In addition to the influence of the political situation, there are no legal provisions in favour of women in the People's Assembly or ministries, or that ensure the representation of women, such as the quota stipulated in the CEDAW. Likewise, there are no provisions in favour of women in electoral laws, associations, media, or political parties. Even within Syrian CSOs that are calculated on the government not the opposition, women may address some aspects of violence, but political participation remains elusive, as stereotypes deem women as unqualified. This idea is prevalent in the Syrian political system, both in regions controlled by the regime, as well as those controlled by the opposition. The prevailing thought is that women do not have the competencies and experience to hold decision-making positions. In the judicial field also, there are no female Sharia judges, and in the Bar Association, there is only one female lawyer in the Women's Committee. Moreover, only once was a woman appointed as editor-in-chief of media and television centres.

Experts also bring up a third reason for the limited political participation of women, which they call internal societal movements that emerged.



The patriarchal mindset that discourages women's participation in all fields, including political ones, is widespread. During the conflict in Syria, however, women's political participation in state activities further decreased. This is because certain governorates internally transformed into a hidden opposition movement that refuses women's involvement in the corrupt government system, as is the case in As-Suwayda Governorate. According to an expert and activist from this governorate, it is considered shameful for women to go to Baath Party offices. However, women do participate in an annual training for female cadres held by the expert's organisation, focusing on the political decision-making field. Sixty women from As-Suwayda graduate from the programme every year, representing a proactive step towards peace processes in Syria. A media expert in Damascus also indicated that: "The political environment discourages women from entering the political decision-making sphere in Syria, as women who run for elections are not socially encouraged. There is no social support for women taking on political roles, perhaps due to lack of trust in their capabilities, which was common before the conflict. In one of the People's Assembly elections, only women who presented their candidacy through a party's list succeeded, meaning that independent women were not elected."

The situation is quite similar in regions that have become politically and militarily independent from the Syrian regime, as the dominant military groups, who uphold strict Islamic tendencies, refuse women's participation. If women demand political representation in these regions, they will be socially attacked, and media with religious and patriarchal dimensions may support these attacks. As a result, several women are forced to quit politics in order to protect themselves from the threats directed at them and their families. An expert in the North-West Syrian area stated that: "There are women who had held positions as editors and in local councils. However, they all resigned due to blackmail that threatened to ruin their reputations or harm their children. There is a female minister who resigned due to threats. In our region, women who engage in politics are pressured by their families to quit."





## 6.2.7 MEDIA AND AWARENESS RAISING ACTIVITIES

Syrian trust in State-run media got further eroded with the eruption of the 2011 protests. The media adopted a discourse that favoured the regime's agenda, regardless of its supposed role in conveying the truth of the violence practiced against civilian protests in the streets. This indicates that national media outlets lack independence and have a deep connection with the regime's political agenda.

According to experts, when Bashar al-Assad came to power in Syria in 2000, the Syrians had high hopes for the young man coming from Europe and for the change that he could bring. Indeed, positive signs appeared in the Syrian media establishment, such as the emergence of private media outlets that somewhat oppose the Syrian regime activities. In addition, Bashar Al-Assad allowed the establishment of cultural and political hubs managed by or with the membership of figures opposed to the regime, a practice that was far-fetched under the 30-year rule of Hafez Al-Assad who banned all types of gatherings. Therefore, there was renewed hope at the time for the reopening of feminist and political organisations in Syria. The Syrian government then signed the CEDAW in 2002, albeit with reservations to Article No. 2, which calls for embodying the principle of equality between men and women in national constitutions, legislation and laws. The media attempted to change stereotypes about women, both through educational curricula, media channels and television drama, which was popular and spread across the Arab world. However, a WRH report<sup>(27)</sup> detailed the subsequent decline of Syrian regime statements regarding freedom of expression. A widespread arrest campaign was launched against anyone who participated in or established a literary or political forum in Syria. Moreover, permissions were denied for openly women-led or feminist political organisations.

In July 2003, the al-Domary newspaper was banned and all media outlets once again found themselves under the control of the Syrian regime. Despite the continued success of drama production, it returned to broadcasting anti-women discourse that reinforces societal stereotypes that degrade women. An expert specialised in media explained that she analysed media discourse in general, with a particular focus on drama discourse. Her approach was rooted in a gender-sensitive perspective and her findings revealed that the media reinforces stereotypes about both women and men, even in reports and statements. The state-run media chose harmful terms and images that promoted VAWG. The majority of experts also agreed that the State-run media promotes VAWG due to its control over TV channels that broadcast soaps, series, and songs that contain degrading discourse towards women. They also agreed that Syrian soaps, particularly comedies, are full of insults directed towards women, and all family members including children often laugh during scenes where male characters physically and verbally abuse their wives.



They also mentioned that dramas convey many messages that promote violent societal beliefs.

Syrian media, both official broadcast channels and newspapers, intentionally neglect issues of VAWG. State-run media scarcely tackles major violence and murder incidents in the form of reports rather than organising media campaigns to raise awareness against such practices. The media also highlights issues of VAWG only when pressured by public opinion. An expert said, in this regard, that: "The case of Ayat Al-Rifai, who was beaten to death by her husband upon the solicitation of his parents, was initially presented in a fragmentary way by Syrian media. However, after the news widely spread on social media, the Syrian media was forced to expose and denounce the incident."

Given the failure of state-run media to address VAWG in Syria, unofficial media outlets have emerged to fill this void and cover this violence. One expert mentioned certain private channels that produce seminars and videos shedding light on women's issues, but their work is limited and insufficient due to limited financial resources.

During the war, as unlicensed CSOs emerged in Syria, their representatives and members assumed the responsibility of raising awareness, education, and outreach, something neglected by the Syrian media. It is important to note that the frequency of CSO activities varied depending on the changing margins of freedom allowed by the ruling authority, be it the Syrian government or the opposition forces. This explains the many initiatives supporting women in Jaramana, Sahnaya, and As-Suwayda, from educational and awareness-raising media campaigns for women to legal and economic action and support. In other regions, however, such as Damascus, Latakia, Tartous, and Hama, civil society activities are very restricted. In this context, a number of experts explained that campaigns sometimes face lack of acceptance from society, especially if they are related to families, gender roles, and women's rights. Many organisations avoid addressing such topics directly in their publications, courses, and workshops, so as not to clash with security services on the one hand and society on the other. Instead, they incorporate concepts of women's empowerment and raise awareness about violence and its forms, as well as the importance of education for girls into courses that are officially announced in the media. One of the experts said: "Still, we cannot tell women that if you are subjected to violence from your husband, you should file a complaint before the police, for example, because we will be accused of destroying and breaking up the family system. Society will also insult us and say that we are a Muslim community, we do not beat our women."

The hardships that CSOs face are not only limited to restrictions in carrying out civil activities, but also include the different visions upheld by donor organisations that support campaigns against VAWG. An expert elaborated that one of the funding European organisations that works with her organisation in Damascus proposed funding for potential programs in Rif Dimashq, for instance, that do not reflect the environment and cultural and social context. She gave an example: "If I launch a European-funded campaign entitled 'Your Body, Your Choice' inside Syria, the campaign would be greatly rejected, not only by men but also by women. The reason is that I cannot take the title widely used outside Syria, translate it literally, and adopt it for a campaign in Syria. I need to first deconstruct the concept, explain, and work on long-term awareness raising before I can launch such a title for the campaign." The expert proceeded to explain that she adapted the campaign title into: (I Am Not a Piece of Cloth), with the main theme being not to judge women by their clothes. Another expert discussed the same issue, which she has recurrently faced through years of work on feminist issues.





## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The division of Syria into different areas of military and political control<sup>(28)</sup> makes it difficult to provide recommendations with a single discourse that suits all the different regions. While it is difficult to address Syrian government institutions, ministries, and departments, it is even more problematic to address other authorities that have control over areas outside of GoS control. It makes it very challenging for the Syrian civil society to communicate with these de facto authorities, monitor their work and hold them accountable.

However, these conclusions and recommendations refer to the GoS and de-facto authorities that control the North-East and North-West of Syria. In light of these considerations, the quantitative and qualitative assessments allow for the following recommendations to be drawn:

### At the Level of the Constitution and National Laws

- Coordinate efforts to integrate gender perspectives into the Syrian Constitution, ensuring freedom, dignity, justice, and the human rights of both women and men. Develop legislation based on equal citizenship, equality between women and men, and the principle of non-discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, colour, origin and other characteristics. The constitution should specifically include the right to protection from violence against women and girls and the right to women's participation in public and political life.
- Lift all reservations on CEDAW to allow harmonisation of national legislative frameworks with international women's rights instruments to which the State has committed to.
- Enact a specific and comprehensive law on combating VAWG, since

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<sup>(28)</sup> Syria is not governed by only one authority or regime, but rather by several military factions with different orientations and international support. Opposition groups control 10.98% of the Syrian territory, namely Idlib, northern Aleppo, Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in Raqqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Al- Zakf and Al-Tanf in South-East Syria. The Syrian government controls 63.38% of the country, namely the Southern region of Deir ez-Zor and the governorates of Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous, Hama, Homs, Daraa, Quneitra, and As-Suwayda. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by Kurdish parties and groups, control 25.64% of the Syrian territory, including large parts of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Qamishli governorates, as well as parts of the Aleppo governorate. To be noted, there are security areas within Al-Hasakah and Qamishli that fall under the control of the regime.

the Syrian laws do not comprehensively combat VAWG and not all forms of VAWG are criminalised under the Penal Code. This law should define and criminalise all forms of violence against women; protect and assist women victims and their children; penalise perpetrators; and ensure coordination between all concerned actors, including civil society. It should also include reporting and referral mechanisms, training for service providers, public awareness raising, monitoring and evaluation, and data collection and dissemination of information on services for victims of VAWG.

- Enact a law to ensure women's rights to sexual and reproductive health.
- Abolish all discriminatory articles against women in the Labour Code, Personal Status Laws, Penal Code, Social Insurance Law, and Agricultural Relations Law to protect women's rights.

These include but are not limited to:

***Penal Code, No. 148/1949 and its subsequent amendments:***


- Abolish Article 508 of the Penal Code, which is related to mitigating the sentence if the rapist marries the victim. Additionally, provide a comprehensive definition of rape and ensure that the penalty for rape is consistently applied.
- Amend articles 192 and 242 of the Penal Code as they can be used by judges to mitigate sentences in cases of "honour crimes".
- Amend Article 513 of the Penal Code, which is related to prostitution, and the penalties of the perpetrators. Additionally, the law should affirm that prostituted women are victims, and that the penalty should be applied to the pimps and clients, as well as providing for the rehabilitation of the woman victim in society.

***Personal Status Laws, specifically Law No. 59/1953 and its subsequent amendments and all Personal Status Laws for the other sects:***

- Reform the Personal Status Laws to ensure equality between women and men in inheritance, marriage relations, divorce, guardianship, and the right to custody of children.
- Establish 18 years old as the legal age of marriage without including exceptional circumstances to approve a marriage for those under this limit.

***Labour Law No. 17/2010, Social Insurance Law No. 92/1959, and Agricultural Relations Law No. 134/ 1958, and their amendments:***

- Amend the Labour Law and its regulations to provide prevention and protection measures against VAWG in the workplace, e.g., requiring all workplaces to establish codes of conduct that regulate and legalise work, preventing gender-based violence including wage disparities, sexual harassment, and exploitation in the workplace.



- Enact a law for the Ministries of Trade, Economy, and Agriculture requiring them to establish economic empowerment departments within these Ministries. These departments should provide professional empowerment for women by delivering government-funded skills development trainings and knowledge courses regarding their rights in the labour market, such as health and social insurance, damage compensation, and end-of-service pension.

**Other laws:**

- Reform the Nationality Law, No. 276/1969 to enable women to pass on nationality to their children or spouse on an equal basis with men.
- Amend the Anti-Prostitution Law, No. 10/1961 and its amendments to ensure the protection of women victims and penalise the perpetrators. Prostitution is a form of VAWG where women caught in prostitution are victims and in need of protection, and the “clients” are perpetrators to be penalised.
- Amend the Anti-Human Trafficking Law, No. 3/2010 to consider and suppress all forms of trafficking women for sexual exploitation.

**At the Level of National Institutions and Services Provided to Victims of VAWG**

- Establish a special body at the ministerial level with the authority to coordinate all actions and decisions of the ministries in regard to equality between women and men. This body should aim to advance the women’s rights agenda and ensure equal representation of women in decision making.
- Call for coordination between all parties in Syria, including government, de-facto authorities, CSOs, and international NGOs, to establish a comprehensive referral system in each region to encourage women and girls to report violence and seek justice. The referral system should address all forms of VAWG and define the tasks of each agency and ministry in this regard, including the police and reporting centres.
- Coordinate actions between the United Nations, international and Syrian CSOs, and the official authorities to achieve goals related to women’s participation in peace-building and security throughout all Syrian territories and to implement all necessary and internationally agreed-upon resolutions, especially with regard to the protection of women, girls and children.
- Develop and expand the cooperation mechanisms such as the network established by members of WoS and GBV sub-clusters, which is comprised of UN, INGO, Syrian CSOs and government agencies. Cooperation should not be limited to the government and licensed CSOs but should include women’s organisations and initiatives that work on combating VAWG. Coordination could be strengthened by conducting quarterly or annual

meetings to learn about their activities and needs, share lessons learned, enhance collaborative work in the field of referrals, and draft joint reports on the patterns of VAWG in each region.

- Call for coordination between different authorities regarding civil records to prevent problems related to documentation of marriage, divorce, and death records.
- Establish effective protection and prevention services in all regions of Syria, including a free hotline, temporary reception points, as well as free legal, health, and psychological counselling centres.
- Develop a directory for existing available services for all areas in Syria and ways for accessing them. Spread information on these services widely through CSOs, online platforms and campaigns. The directory should cover, but not be limited to, the governmental hotline (9461), shelters, CSOs centres, psychological and legal services, as well as the ways to report VAWG to the police and courts.
- Conduct regular quantitative studies to determine the extent of VAWG that women and girls in Syria are exposed to and assess the extent of their need for shelters to protect them from violence.
- Establish safe shelters for victims of VAWG across Syria, where women can receive support services and protection through a victim-centred approach.
- Ensure that service providers are receiving continuous training and guidance on a victim-centred approach. All parties, including the government, CSOs, and international NGOs, should support trainings and capacity-building activities for service providers.
- It is recommended to establish networking and communication channels between shelters and both public and private sectors that are willing to and can provide job opportunities and trainings for the women from the shelters.
- Appoint and train female police officers in police stations, especially to handle reported cases of VAWG. Policewomen should be responsible for communicating with and receiving the abused women, especially given the conservative nature of Syrian society. Police stations must be connected to the referral system for women victims.
- Develop and implement policies, procedures, guidelines and training for relief personnel to identify, prevent and sanction any racist, ethnic, sexist or other bias during relief distribution. This should include conducting reference checks on breaches of conduct upon recruitment, establishing effective complaints and feedback mechanisms, and protecting whistle-blowers.

- Establish permanent social centres in all Syrian regions to implement activities, initiatives, and trainings for women, girls, men and boys regarding family building, marital relationships, and raising children from a perspective of women rights and gender-based equality. These centres should also provide social and family counselling services aimed at rebuilding the community system that was damaged during the war and positively influencing families to accept the choices women and girls make in education, work, marriage, and childbirth.
- Implement oversight over the widows' camps located in the de facto authorities' areas supported by Turkey and the Autonomous Administration areas. Establish and implement rules to ensure that children can remain with their mothers until the age of 18. Social centres should also work within these camps to raise awareness among children and their widowed mothers and to provide education on concepts related to justice and equality between women and men.

### **At the Level of Prevention**

- Official and alternative media should fulfil their expected roles in creating the necessary political, cultural, and social awareness that supports women's participation in political and economic decision-making, while promoting the role of men in supporting this participation and achieving equal representation between men and women. Syrian media should also carry out its responsibility in reporting, denouncing, and following up on all cases of VAWG in Syria. This can be achieved through programmes and seminars that discuss the prevention and criminalisation of these practices and address the root causes.
- Develop and extend awareness-raising campaigns to cover all areas in Syria. All parties, including the government, de-facto authorities, CSOs and international NGOs, are responsible for carrying out campaigns aimed at raising social awareness on VAWG and supporting its prevention. These campaigns should focus on, but not be limited to, raising awareness of all forms of VAWG, shifting the blame from victims to perpetrators, challenging stereotypes about gender roles, promoting equality between women and men in mobility, advocating for equal access and control of financial and economic resources, and spreading information about available services.
- Adopt a policy by State-run Syrian media to challenge gender-based stereotypes and prejudices and to raise public awareness regarding VAWG, its root causes and its various types, including political, economic, social, physical, psychological, sexual or digital forms. Media should also support the dissemination of information on the existing services for victims of VAWG.
- Call for the reviewing of the educational curricula to make them gender-sensitive and address the stereotypical representation of women.



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[https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria\\_inlcu](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria_inlcu)

## Arabic Resources:

- الدستور السوري الصادر بالمرسوم 94 لعام 2012
- قانون العقوبات العام 148 لعام 1948، المعدل بالمرسوم التشريعي 1 لعام 2011
- القانون رقم 2/ لعام 2020 القاضي بإلغاء المادة 548 من قانون العقوبات
- المرسوم التشريعي رقم 3/ لعام 2010 القاضي بمنع الاتجار بالأشخاص
- قانون الأحوال الشخصية العام رقم 59 لعام 1953 وتعديلاته اللاحقة
- قانون العمل رقم 17 لعام 2010
- قانون التأمينات الاجتماعية رقم 92 لعام 1959
- قانون العلاقات الزراعية رقم 134 لعام 1958 وتعديلاتها اللاحقة
- قانون الجنسية رقم 276 لعام 1969
- قانون مكافحة الدعارة رقم 10 لعام 1961

## ANNEXES



## ANNEX 1: SAMPLING FRAME & SCORING METHODOLOGY

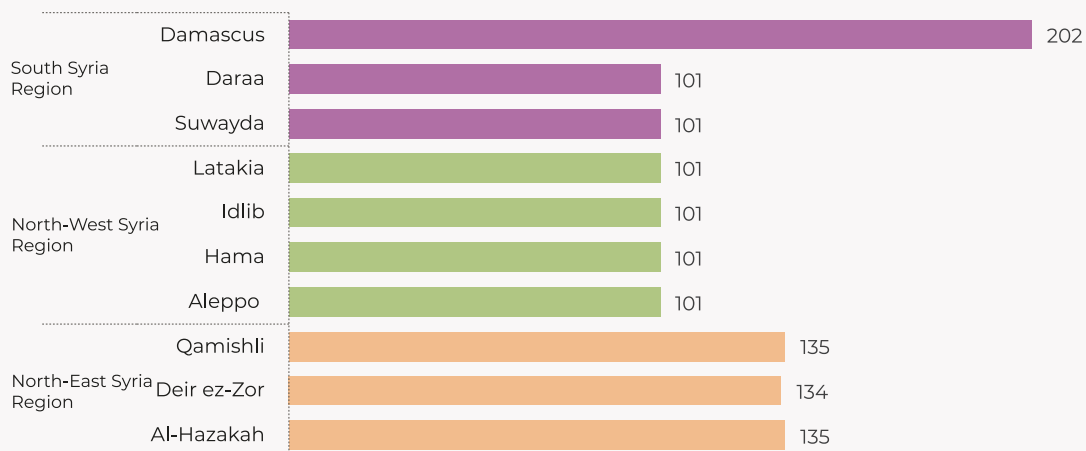
**A total of 1212 females were randomly selected to participate in the current survey, including 404 individuals from each of Syria's three regions: North-East, North-West and South of Syria.** The governorates of Al-Hasakah (33% of the regional sample), Deir Ez-Zor (33%) and Qamishli (33%) were covered in the North-East region, Aleppo (25%), Hama (25%), Idlib (25%) and Latakia (25%) in the North-West, and finally, Damascus (50%), Daraa (25%) and As-Suwayda (25%) in the South. Representation (confidence interval of 95%) is established on the governorate (margin of error between 6.9 and 9.75), regional (margin of error of 4.88) and national (margin of error of 2.81) levels.

**The respondents' age groups were all representative (confidence interval of 95%) on the national level, except for those who are more than 60.** This includes the 18 to 25 (margin of error of 5.35), 26 to 40 (margin of error of 4.54) and 41 to 60 (margin of error of 5.27) groups. Similar trend is observed on the regional level, where all age groups are representative (margin of error ranging between 7.74 and 9.85) except for those that are older than 60. Furthermore, none of the age groups are representative on the governorate level. Therefore, it is important to note that trends included in this study related to age groups on either the governorate level or on 60+ age group should be perceived as indicative rather than conclusive.

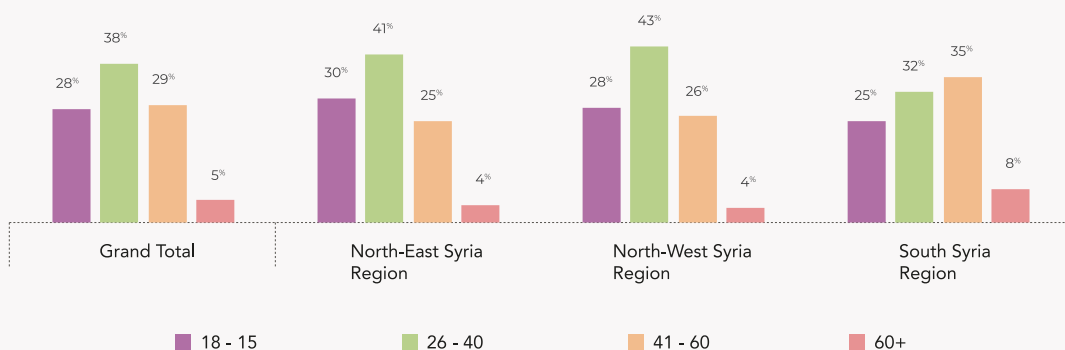
**In terms of level of attained education, and on a regional level, all groups are representative (margin of error between 6.31 and 9.26) except for those with non-formal education in both the North-West and South areas of Syria.** On the governorate level, only the group with higher education in Damascus is representative (margin of error of 9.52). Similar to the case of the age distribution of the sample, interpretation of the educational group on different regional levels with no representation should be cautiously interpreted in order not to automatically generalise the quantitative results.

**Finally, the KAP scoring methodology relied on equal weights across all questions within each section of the survey. The total score per question per respondent was normalised to fit a 0 to 100 scale; this is attained by dividing the score per response by the total grade that can be achieved per question, and subsequently, multiplying the result by 100.** Note that the score per answer for each question is further discussed in the data sheet shared with this report. To calculate the mean scores of each of the awareness, beliefs and opinion and personal experience categories of the total sample, the first step was to compute the scores per individuals, which involves adding all of the scores per respondent per category and dividing them by the number of questions answered. The second step involved conducting an average calculation of the scores of all individuals within each category.

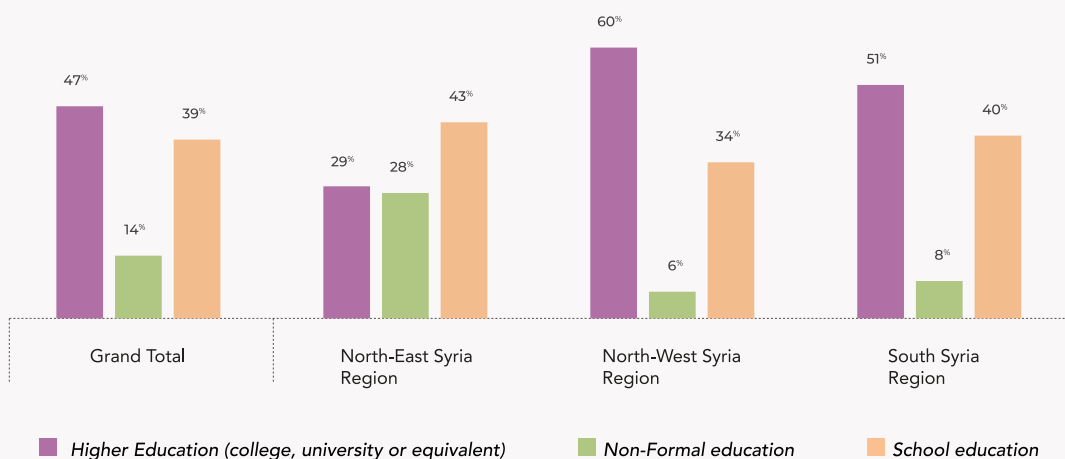
## Sample Frame



## Age groups per region



## Level of education per region





## General Trends

Overall awareness of VAWG among Syrian women ranged between 35.1% and 36% on average across the three locations, yet these differences in grades are not statistically significant. This implies that the total knowledge across the areas covered in Syria is the same. On the contrary, the mean of the total scores related to beliefs and personal experience are statistically significantly different across the regions. For the former, the highest grade was recorded in the North-West area (73.6%), while the least in the North-East (60.4%) of Syria. For the latter, the grades ranged between 66% and 71.4%.

The deviation observed in the total scores between the awareness (36%) from one hand and the beliefs (67.1%) and personal experience (68.7%) from another is the result of the respondents' lack of knowledge related to the existence of governmental and non-governmental entities working in the field of VAWG, along with the services that they are providing. This could be the result of either weak communication and engagement efforts with communities from the side of the relevant or due to the limited services delivered to the vulnerable individuals in the regions. Note that low scores were recorded in questions k\_2.6, k\_2.7, k\_2.8, k\_2.9, k\_2.10, k\_2.11, k\_2.12 and k\_2.14.

In terms of beliefs, the three main questions that received relatively lower scores were whether males should have guardianship over their wives and families, information about VAWG is sufficiently being reflected in the media, and finally, women have the right to moving in the public space in the same way as men. For the personal experience, many have reported to have recently witnessed VAWG cases, and many of those respondents facing incidents themselves did not report it; note that the sample of the latter question was not representative, and the finding cannot be generalised. Furthermore, many reported that women experiencing violence do not seek help and that significant number of barriers exist for reporting such cases.

The data also showed that age and education are negatively correlated. In terms of awareness and beliefs, younger generations tend to have better scores, yet in the field of personal experience, the older age groups recorded higher grades. The factor of educational attainment is a determinant of awareness, beliefs, and personal experience, where positive correlations exist between the former and the three latter variables, separately. Awareness is positively correlated with beliefs and personal experience, yet beliefs and personal experience are not connected to each other in this study.

The lack of correlation between beliefs and personal experiences does not come as a surprise, especially that the theoretical reliance on the traditional KAP model<sup>(29)</sup> to create behavioural change has been highly criticised in the last few decades. For instance, Linden (2013)<sup>(30)</sup> argues that the KAP, followed by the expectancy-value framework are preoccupied with "conscious change" where they assume that human behaviour is goal directed; while newer models integrate other variables to their conceptual frameworks, such as emotions, habits, norms, environmental/contextual factors, etc. On the other hand, most behavioural change models consider knowledge as a pre-requisite to amending practices, and this connection is evident in this study.

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(29) Knowledge (awareness), Attitude (beliefs) and Practice (personal experience) is the process of creating behavioral change through achieving three stages: acquiring knowledge generates better attitude, and subsequently, improved attitude help form new practices.

(30) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280579281\\_Response\\_to\\_Dolan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280579281_Response_to_Dolan)

**Table 1. The scores of knowledges (awareness) across the three regions of Syria.**

Scores: Awareness About VAWG													
K_2.1	K_2.2	K_2.4	K_2.5	K_2.6	K_2.7	K_2.8	K_2.9	K_2.10	K_2.11	K_2.12	K_2.13	K_2.14	Total
60%	69%	70%	52%	44%	30%	5%	29%	15%	15%	5%	47%	17%	35%
79%	58%	72%	50%	15%	29%	14%	25%	27%	8%	7%	63%	34%	37%
57%	58%	64%	48%	20%	37%	17%	28%	22%	11%	21%	51%	34%	36%
65%	62%	69%	50%	27%	32%	12%	27%	21%	11%	11%	54%	28%	36%

**Table 2. The scores of attitudes (beliefs and opinions) across the three regions of Syria.**

Scores: Beliefs and opinion													
A_3.1.1	A_3.1.2	A_3.1.3	A_3.2	A_3.3	A_3.4	A_3.5	A_3.6	A_3.7	A_3.8	A_3.9	A_3.11	A_3.12.5	Total
75%	80%	83%	69%	44%	60%	35%	45%	67%	78%	75%	21%	55%	60%
87%	91%	91%	83%	55%	70%	74%	67%	74%	82%	86%	33%	66%	74%
83%	86%	92%	64%	36%	51%	62%	71%	77%	80%	80%	30%	63%	67%
82%	86%	89%	72%	45%	60%	57%	61%	73%	80%	80%	28%	61%	67%

**Table 3.**  
**The scores of practices (personal experience of VAWG) across the three regions of Syria.**

Scores: Personal experience of VAWG																	
Region/Question	P_4.1	P_4.3	P_4.5	P_4.6	P_4.7	P_4.8	P_4.9	P_4.10	P_4.11	P_4.12	P_4.13	P_4.14	P_4.15	P_4.16	P_4.17	P_4.18	Total
North-East Syria	32%	41%	36%	57%	89%	95%	66%	65%	59%	56%	77%	89%	60%	74%	94%	8%	66%
North-West Syria	36%	23%	29%	67%	91%	96%	78%	76%	73%	76%	83%	91%	70%	83%	97%	9%	71%
South Syria	33%	46%	45%	58%	87%	96%	71%	67%	66%	63%	77%	91%	69%	78%	88%	8%	69%
Total	33%	37%	37%	61%	89%	96%	72%	70%	66%	65%	79%	90%	66%	79%	93%	8%	69%

**Independent Samples Test (Awareness of South and North-East Regions)**

Correlations						
	Age range:	Highest level of Education:	Total_K	Total_A	Total_P	
Age range:	Pearson Correlation	1	-.199**	-.119**	-.071*	.220**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.013	.000
	N	1212	1212	1212	1212	1212
Highest level of Education:	Pearson Correlation	-.199**	1	.402**	.416**	.176**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	1212	1212	1212	1212	1212
Total_K	Pearson Correlation	-.119**	.402**	1	.125**	.143**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	1212	1212	1212	1212	1212
Total_A	Pearson Correlation	-.071*	.416**	.125**	1	.020
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000	.000		.488
	N	1212	1212	1212	1212	1212
Total_P	Pearson Correlation	.220**	.176**	.143**	.020	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.488	
	N	1212	1212	1212	1212	1212

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (-2tailed). \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (-2tailed).

## ANNEX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE

The Regional Observatory on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is undertaking a population-based survey in Syria within the frame of the program “Implementing the Common Agenda to Combat VAWG and Promote Inclusive Peace building Processes in Syria”, funded by EU. The objective of the survey is to assess the level of awareness of women towards the laws and services provided for victims of VAWG, and explore the personal perception and experience related to VAWG in Syria.

Mention should be made that the observatory is hosted by the EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) in the regional office in Amman.

All information filled by you will be kept confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this study. Your participation in this questionnaire is very important and will contribute to improve the situation of women and girls in the country.

*Please provide informed consent and in order to continue with the survey questions.*

☐ **Yes.**      ☐ **No**

Date: .....

### **First section: General information**

Place of residence: .....

Province/governorate: .....

Nationality: .....

Age range: ☐ 18-25    ☐ 26- 40    ☐ 41-60    ☐ above 60

Highest level of Education:

☐ non-Formal education    ☐ School education    ☐ Higher Education (college, University or equivalent)

Religion or Sect: .....

### **Second section: Awareness about VAWG:**

**2.1 What does VAWG mean to you?** *Note: you can check more than one choice.*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rape                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Child marriage                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual assault        | <input type="checkbox"/> Exclusion of resources and power |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical assault      | <input type="checkbox"/> Cyber violence.                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Verbal Violence       | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, specify.                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Psychological assault |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forced marriage       |   |



**2.2 The level of prevalence of VAWG in your community is according to you:**

☐ Very common   ☐ Common   ☐ Not common   ☐ Do not know

**2.3 What are your sources of information about VAWG?**

☐ Media   ☐ Government/ local authority   ☐ CSOs/CBOs and networks   ☐ Relatives and friends   ☐ Others, Specify .....

**2.4 According to you, your knowledge about VAWG is:**

☐ Good (sufficient knowledge)   ☐ Moderate   ☐ Little knowledge.   ☐ I have no knowledge

**2.5 Your awareness about legal procedures for reporting VAWG is:**

☐ Good (sufficient knowledge)   ☐ Moderate   ☐ Little knowledge.   ☐ I have no knowledge

**2.6 Are you aware of existence of government / local authority institutions that address VAWG in your area?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.7 Are you aware of existence of civil society institutions that address VAWG in your area?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.8 Is there a hotline specific for reporting cases of VAWG in Syria?**

☐ Yes.   ☐ No

**2.9 Is there a specific a governmental directorate for protection of family in Syria?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.10 Are you aware of any legal procedures to report sexual harassment incidents?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.11 Does the government / local authority provide shelters for women victims of VAWG?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.12 Do the CSOs provide shelters for women victims of VAWG?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**2.13 Do the CSOs provide some services as psychological or logistical support?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

### **Third Section: Beliefs and opinion**

*Please, check the box that corresponds your opinion towards VAWG*

#### **Opinion towards social norms that perpetuate VAWG**

**3.1 According to you, is it acceptable for the husband to hit his wife in the following cases:**

- If she neglects children

☐ Yes, in some cases   ☐ No

- If she argues with him:

☐ Yes, in some cases   ☐ No

- If she refuses sex:

☐ Yes, in some cases   ☐ No

**3.2 Rape should be decriminalised in some situations related to women's clothing and behaviour.**

☐ Strongly agree      ☐ Agree      ☐ Neutral.      ☐ Disagree      ☐ Strongly disagree

**3.3 Male should have guardianship over his wife and family**

☐ Strongly agree      ☐ Agree      ☐ Neutral      ☐ Disagree      ☐ Strongly disagree

**3.4 Boys should be responsible for the behavior of their sisters, even if they are younger than their sisters.**

☐ Strongly agree      ☐ Agree      ☐ Neutral      ☐ Disagree      ☐ Strongly disagree

**Opinion towards law and services for combating VAWG:**

*Please, check the cross on the choice that correspond your opinion.*

**3.5 According to your opinion, is information about VAWG sufficiently reflected in the media?**

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Do not know

**3.6 Are the laws and procedures for protection of women from violence sufficient in Syria**

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Do not know

**3.7 Do you think that women's rights and equal participation in all spheres of life recognised by the law in the same way as men?**

☐ Yes      ☐ No

**3.8 Do you think women have the same financial rights as men under the law during marriage or after divorce?**

☐ Yes      ☐ No

**3.9 Do you think that women who are victims of violence by their husband or family accept to stay with them because of her lack of financial resources?**

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Do not know

**3.10 Do you think that women have the right to moving in the public space in the same way as men?**

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ Do not know

**Please, check the box that corresponds your choice**

**3.11 Is it difficult or easy for women to utilise the following services in the community?**

**Please check.**

• Police.	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult	<input type="checkbox"/> Easy	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not know
• Health Care.	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult	<input type="checkbox"/> Easy	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not know
• Legal aid	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult	<input type="checkbox"/> Easy	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not know
• Protection /assistance	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult	<input type="checkbox"/> Easy	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not know

**3.12 With the beginning of armed conflict in Syria, VAWG is:**

☐ In massive increase    ☐ In increase    ☐ In decrease.    ☐ Stay the same    ☐ Do not know

**3.12.A 'if answer above is mentioning "increase" or in "massive increase": The form/forms of VAWG that increased significantly the most due to the armed conflict in Syria is:**

*Note: you can check more than one choice.*

- ☐ Rape
- ☐ Sexual assault
- ☐ Physical assault
- ☐ Psychological assault
- ☐ Forced marriage
- ☐ Early marriage
- ☐ Women's Exclusion of financial resources and exclusion of power
- ☐ Violence against giving opinions
- ☐ Verbal violence

**3.13 In the past year, have you heard of or participated in campaigns set up by the government or civilian institutions in Syria to support women who are subjected to violence?**

- ☐ Yes: can you name it or them?.....
- ☐ No.                      ☐ Do not know

#### **Fourth Section: Personal experience of VAWG**

**4.1 In the past 6 months, have you witnessed VAWG?**

- ☐ Yes                      ☐ No

**4.2 If yes, what type of VAWG have you witnessed? Note: you can put cross on more than one choice.**

- ☐ Sexual assault
- ☐ Conflict related sexual harassment
- ☐ Physical assault
- ☐ Forced marriage
- ☐ Psychological abuse
- ☐ Exclusion from education, health, inheritance

**4.3 Do women who experience violence look for help?**

- ☐ Yes                      ☐ No                      ☐ Don't Know

**4.4 if yes, from your experience, what kind of help victims of VAWG seek for first:**

- ☐ Relatives
- ☐ Police
- ☐ Hotline
- ☐ Special centres for victims of VAWG
- ☐ Court
- ☐ Other, specify .....
- ☐ I don't know

**4.5 From your experience, what are the barriers that hinder women from reporting violence? Note: you can put cross on more than one choice.**

- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Rejection or being ostracised by family and friends
- ☐ Fear of consequences and the threats of perpetrator.
- ☐ Nothing can be done
- ☐ Other, specify .....

**4.6 During the past 12 months, have you been insulted in the street, public transport vehicle or public spaces?**

- ☐ Never                      ☐ Once                      ☐ Several times

**4.7 During the past 12 months, did anyone attempt or force you or to undergo or perform**

any sexual contact/acts against your will?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.8 During the past 12 months, did anyone try or managed to have sexual intercourse with you against your will?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.9 During the past 12 months, has your husband/family members prevented you from meeting or talking to friends or family members?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.10 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members refuse to take your opinions into consideration, ridicule them or attempted to tell you what you should think.

☐ Never

☐ Sometimes

☐ Always

4.11 Do you encounter exclusion from decision making within the household?

☐ Never

☐ Sometimes

☐ Always

4.12 Do you encounter exclusion from control over expenses or income?

☐ Never

☐ Sometimes

☐ Always

4.13 During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members threatened or squeezed you financially?

☐ Never

☐ Sometimes

☐ Always

4.14 In the past 12 months, have your spouse or family members prevented or postponed your doctor's visit?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.15 During the past 12 months, do your husband/spouse or family members insult you or abuse you?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.16 During the past 12 months, did your husband/family members slap you or inflict other physical abuse on you? If yes, how many times?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.17. During the past 12 months, did your husband/spouse or family members utter death threats against you?

☐ Never

☐ Once

☐ Several times

4.18. If it happened, after this incident, did you lodge a complaint?

☐ Yes

☐ No

## 5. Open Questions (Optional):

5.1. In your view, can you mention the main causes or roots of VAWG?

5.2 In your opinion, what is the best reaction that women should have towards VAWG?

5.3 How did the armed conflicts in Syria have impact on VAWG?

5.4 What is the main measure that should be taken to improve the protection of women from VAWG in Syria?

## ANNEX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### In Depth- interviews Questions

- 1.** Can you please tell me a little about yourself and your role in the community?
- 2.** How would you define VAWG?  
(If not mentioned before) Is discrimination a form of VAWG for you?
- 3.** What do you think are the main causes of VAWG and discrimination against women and girls?
- 4.** In your opinion, how did the war in Syria contribute to increase the VAWG prevalence? What are the forms of VAWG that increased the most? What about conflict related sexual violence?
- 5.** Do you think the categories (widows, divorced women, daughters of divorced women, orphan girls, former detainees, displaced women, women with disabilities) are more vulnerable to VAWG in Syria? How? Is there any governmental support for these categories or maybe legal support? Did you witness VAWG situations regarding one of more of these categories?
- 6.** In your view, what are the commonly held cultural and social norms in Syria that permit violence against women and girls?
- 7.** Who are according to you the women who are the most exposed to VAWG in Syria? Why and How?
- 8.** Is there any governmental support for these women categories, if yes could you elaborate?
- 9.** Do you know about government services provided to women victims of VAWG? Do you think they are efficient? If not: What is needed most?
- 10.** More globally what about government stand and action regarding VAWG? If answer, which ones are the most relevant?
- 11.** VAWG is a global phenomenon. What about Syria?  
Can you tell me more? What are the main sources of this violence? what are its expressions, can you give me some examples?
- 12.** Some males in the family prevent their daughter, sister, or wife from going out to public places, working, or studying. In your opinion, is this due to their responsibility to protect her from harassment and inconvenience? In order to avoid being harassed and then expose their image to abuse in society. Or because of that daughter, wives, sisters are considered as one of men property?
- 13.** How would you describe women's participation in economic and political life in your country?  
(Only if they are silent): Are women facing some obstacles to have access to these spheres? If yes, what are according to you the main reasons behind this? (If the participants from the non-governmental areas we can ask about now and before, what is the differences?)
- 14.** In your opinion, has the economic crisis in Syria changed women's roles, forcing them to participate in public work, and if so, causing them to experience more sexism and violence?

- 15.** What are the main consequences of the protracted armed conflict on VAWG: for example, increasing of this violence, visibility, decreasing of legal protection?
- 16.** According to you, is there any coordination between government institutions and between government and civil society to address VAWG? If yes: Can you tell us more about it, If not. Why in your opinion?
- 17.** Do you think that media play positive role or negative role in reducing VAWG in Syria? How? Please explain? What about education then?
- 18.** Does the media seek to make citizens reject the violence against women and girls in Syria, or is it enough with media reports and news?
- 19.** Do you follow the global anti-violence awareness campaigns that are broadcasting on social media?
- 20.** Do you have participated or worked on designing and supporting strategies for inclusive peace processes to protect women and girls from VAWG.
- 21.** Do you think that the displacement of women and their uprooting from their social environments made them more vulnerable to violence in public places? To what extent do you think women's families and communities can protect them against harassment and violence in public places?
- 22.** How can you describe women's participation in the leadership positions in your organisation?  
(Only if they are silent): Are women facing some obstacles to have access to these spheres? If yes, what are the main reasons behind this?
- 23.** In your opinion, to what extent are national laws and public policies for the elimination of violence against women and girls in Syria are in line with international obligations? What are the main obstacles for the harmonisation?
- 24.** What do you recommend for enhancing protection of women from VAWG in Syria, especially in areas under conflict and what kind of violence should be urgently addressed?
- 25.** How do you define the economic violence against women and girls? to what extent do Syrian women and girls associated with your organisation strive for work and independence? Have you or your organisation participated in trainings or campaigns to motivate women to work or have you given lectures about why work and independence are important for women and girls?
- 26.** To which extend in your opinion the Syrian family law support women against being subjected to the economic violence?  
Think about divorced woman and their right to share her former husband their properties, guardianship right on daughters and their mother, widowed women, divorced wives with the so called customary "Urfi" marriages or customary marriages, prevent women from work, seizing the money or the salary of wives, sisters or daughters and inheritance? (If the participant is from non-governmental areas, ask her about the governance, regarding women issues, in her area and what the differences are between the situation of women now under the new power and before

under the power of the regime).

**27.** Has your organisation worked on projects to find employment opportunities for women? If so, is there follow-up on these projects, such as measuring the safe spaces in their workplaces?

**28.** Are you or your colleagues in your organisation working to raise women's awareness of VAWG?

**29.** Do you (or your colleagues) routinely ask questions to determine whether the girls or women might be a victim of family violence?

**30.** Do you (or your colleagues) provide aftercare to women who have been victims of domestic violence? Are there any services or facilities where you can refer female victims for help?

**31.** If you have the space to be representative of VAWG in Syria, what changes would you take in your consideration in legislation, policy or work force would empower women and girls and enable peaceful and safe spaces for them?

**32.** How do you think the ongoing armed conflict has made all forms of VAWG even more visible, has the ongoing armed conflict blurred legal protection? What political and legal procedures should be taken through the government to take the edge off the impact of the armed conflict on women and girls in Syria?

**33.** Which kind of awareness campaign should be conducted through the medical centres to prevent VAWG?

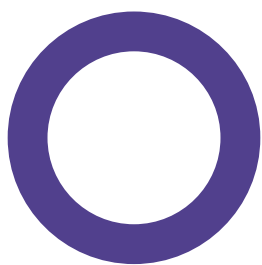
**34.** Do the medical centres participate in rising the awareness of the sexual culture within the Syrian communities?

**35.** As a researcher inside Syria, did you participated in researches to study the Syrian women circumstances after the crisis? Or maybe heard about some researches are conducted through the Syrian universities about VAWG?

**36.** What do you know about economic violence against women and girls? During your profession, have you worked on issues such as why it is crucial to empower women financially?

**37.** Are there awareness campaigns that explain and reject possible forms of violence against women?

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EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) is a policy platform that provides expertise in the field of equality between women and men and advocates for women's human rights as inseparable from democracy building and citizenship, for political solutions to all conflicts, and for the right of peoples to self-determination. EFI has supported for over a decade the Syrian civil society organisations who work on promoting women's rights and equality between women and men in Syria. Combating all forms of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) as a major barrier to women participation in decision making and peace building in Syria during the protracted armed conflict has been an inseparable part of this support.

The Regional Observatory on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) was established as an independent mechanism to follow up on laws and policies related to combating VAWG and support the implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Ministerial Declarations. The Observatory is established and hosted by EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) in Amman. The Observatory is conducting studies on the situation of VAWG and the tools used for combating it at national and regional level. The findings of this study have supported the inclusion of Syria in the 2024 Regional Index on VAWG.