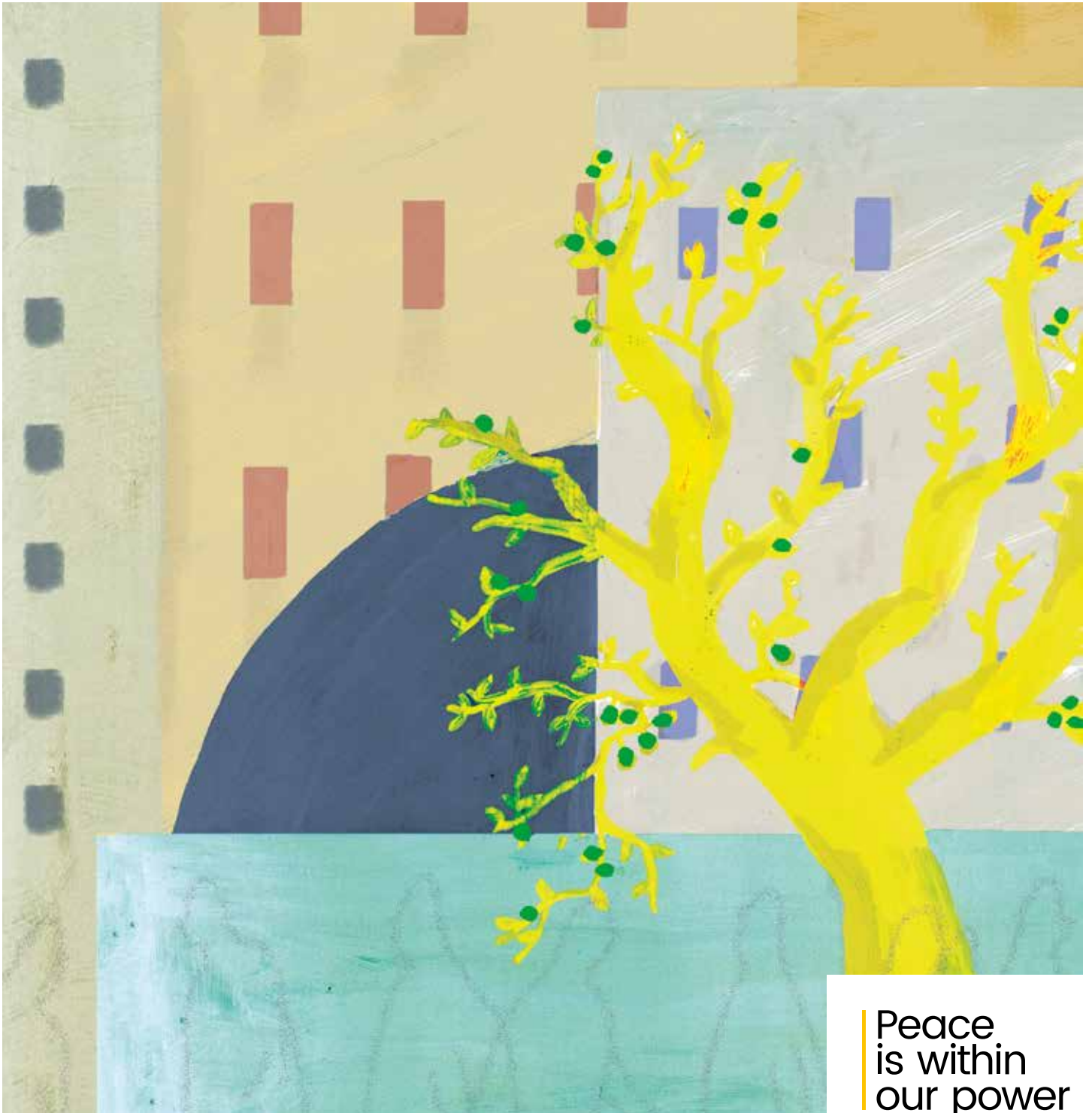




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“Most of the men want to leave”

Armed groups, displacement and the
gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria



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Armed groups, displacement and the
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Lana Khattab and Henri Myrntinen

July 2017

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Abbreviations

EFM	Early and forced marriage
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ITS	Informal tented settlement
KII	Key informant interview
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or intersex
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i> (Democratic Union Party)
SEA	Sexual exploitation and abuse
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SGM	Sexual and gender minority
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i> (People's Protection Units)
YPJ	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jin</i> (Women's Protection Units)

Executive summary

The six years of war in Syria, at the time of writing, have affected all Syrians directly or indirectly, regardless of gender, age, class, location, educational level, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. These various factors, however, do play a key role in defining from what position of power or powerlessness, and with what degree of agency, individuals experience the conflict, what opportunities they have and what expectations are placed on them by others. Some of these expectations and constraints are heightened in times of war and vulnerabilities are exacerbated. However, vulnerabilities are not automatic and individuals can try to negotiate their way out of them, although at extremely high costs.

This report looks at some of the gendered vulnerabilities and possibilities for agency faced by Syrians in a time of war and displacement. It examines some of the ways in which the expectations to be a man or a woman of a certain class, educational level, marital status, ethno-religious background or living in a certain geographical location creates particular pressures – for example, to join an armed group or carry out economic activities previously seen as unacceptable. Gendered expectations also play a role in why some women and men choose to take up arms and others do not, although the same gendered expectations can lead to radically different results. The expectation placed on men to be a breadwinner and protector can lead some men to join an armed group in light of few other available options, while others may choose to flee the conflict-affected area with their families.

This study presents a snapshot of the situation in early 2016, when the field research was conducted. The situation on the ground and around Syria has changed since then: a marked hardening of European Union (EU) refugee policy, the increased role played by Russia, the renaming of the Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the fall of Aleppo and the gradual reduction in the area under the control of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are just some of the developments. Nonetheless, many of the underlying gender dynamics described in this report that affect the lives of individual Syrians have not changed.

Furthermore, looking forward to the day when the fighting ends, an understanding of these dynamics will be essential to the arduous process of reintegrating displaced populations and former fighters, and to slowly rebuilding the social fabric of Syria. Understanding gendered push and pull factors for joining or not joining armed groups as much as comprehending the role of gender in creating various kinds of pressures and vulnerabilities for Syrians will be essential to starting effective peacebuilding. This will be important both in the broad sense of increasing social cohesion and inclusivity, and in the more narrow sense of having, for example, more effective programmes for the reintegration of displaced populations and former combatants, psychosocial rehabilitation or future transitional justice processes.

Susceptibilities to recruitment into armed groups are gendered

While there are no definable 'categories' of those who would be more susceptible to join armed groups, there are some broad observations about the gendered dynamics of recruitment. Men and boys face specific vulnerabilities relating to forced recruitment and direct engagement in armed groups. Social expectations to defend and protect the community and the family, coupled with a military culture glorifying male leadership in Syria prior to the conflict, may increase their susceptibility to engage in, or be shamed for not engaging in, the armed conflict. The drastic demographic, socio-economic and infrastructural changes in Syria mean that achieving 'manhood'

through traditional means, including marriage and fatherhood, is made more difficult. This, in turn, opens the door for alternative ways to potentially achieve status and privilege, including through gaining positions of power in armed groups, but also through fulfilling male breadwinner expectations by earning a salary in the armed group and thus being able to provide for their families.

The economic and livelihood dimension of joining armed groups emerged as a key dynamic in this study. On the other hand, many Syrian men have also rejected violence and left Syria, either fleeing conscription or non-state armed groups trying to recruit them. Political opposition to the government or level of education are seemingly not strongly correlated with the choice to fight. While defence of communities targeted by violence as well as grievances against the opposing side were initial drivers for many to join armed groups, the situation has evolved into a complex web of armed actors operating within a war economy.

Ethnic and confessional identity plays more of a role in identifying which armed group one would join, rather than whether one would join an armed group per se. For instance, a Syrian Arab man from the Idlib governorate might join a local brigade that would have been part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), while a Kurdish woman in Hasakah might join the *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (YPJ, Women's Protection Units) in Rojava. In addition to location, a particular armed group's financial and military strength also plays a role, thus making more successful groups more attractive to fighters.

Vulnerabilities resulting from the Syrian conflict are gendered

The violent conflict in Syria has had severe repercussions on Syrians in all aspects of their lives, including physically, psychologically and socio-economically. It is important to keep in mind that it has affected everyone – that is, men, women and those with other gender identities – in different yet significant ways depending on different social variables including age, urban-rural location, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) or educational level. As men face precarious security situations in Syria and in host countries, often unable to fulfil their gendered expectations such as finding work and providing for their families, this might result in negative coping strategies including an increase in domestic violence and psychological challenges. Men and boys in Syria, as in other contexts of displacement, have been subjected to different forms of sexual violence.

Women and girls face different layers of vulnerabilities, ranging from the heightened risk of physical and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and early and forced marriage (EFM), to a shift in gender roles that can increase the caretaking role and add income-generating responsibilities. The situation for sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) is in part extremely precarious as they risk physical, sexual and psychological violence from most social actors around them. Their social class and position of power plays an important role in how much their SOGI affects their life, as does their possibility of 'blending into' the heteronormative surrounding, which can involve extremely painful compromises.

1. Introduction

The violent conflict in Syria has been ongoing since 2011. At the time of writing, almost half a million Syrians have died¹ and over 11 million people have been displaced or forced to flee the country in what has been called "the worst humanitarian crisis of our time", making Syrians the largest refugee population in the world.² While the conflict in Syria has been thoroughly analysed and debated,³ there is comparatively little analysis from a comprehensive gender perspective. When trying to understand conflict dynamics, motives to take up arms or decisions to take refuge in neighbouring countries, it is essential to adopt a nuanced approach that takes into account socio-political and contextual sensitivities to avoid making problematic generalisations or misrepresentations, which might have dire consequences if actions based on them are implemented.

This report focuses on the impacts of the war on Syrians from a gender perspective, considering both vulnerabilities as well as the gendered susceptibilities to recruitment into armed groups. The situation in Syria as well as in the refugee settings of Turkey and Lebanon will be examined. The term 'gender' will be used as referring to the attitudes, expectations and behaviours associated with or deemed appropriate for 'men' and 'women'. This report will also look at gender identities beyond the traditional gender binary, for example, trans or intersex persons or those with non-heterosexual orientations, who face a particular set of risks in Syria and in situations of displacement. Given the ubiquity of the term 'vulnerability' in the humanitarian sector, it is worth keeping in mind that vulnerability is not something that is inherent to a person or group. For example, neither a young girl nor a transgender man is born vulnerable. Their vulnerability is the result of discriminatory social norms, exclusionary practices and, in some cases, the societal acceptance of violence against them.

As debates on the Syrian conflict have at times remained tied to culturally essentialist arguments, evidence from this research strongly calls for a more nuanced understanding of Syrians' gendered needs and vulnerabilities that is more broadly based on thorough research rather than assumptions.⁴ While this report will not explore resilience factors to recruitment to armed groups⁵ in detail, it will nonetheless refer to them throughout the analysis. The findings of this report are based on field research conducted in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, which was supplemented by secondary sources and meetings held with practitioners. Due to the limited sample size predicated by the constraints of the project, the research findings in this report do not claim to be representative, but instead indicative in identifying trends and contributing to the existing evidence base.

This report presents a snapshot of the situation in early 2016, after which the circumstances on the ground and around Syria have changed due to, for example, a marked hardening of the EU refugee policy, the increased role played by Russia, the renaming of the Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the fall of opposition-held areas in Aleppo, and the gradual reduction in the area under the control of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the country, to name a few.

1 I. Black, Report on Syria conflict finds 11.5% of population killed or injured, The Guardian, 11 February 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured>

2 Mercy Corps, Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis, 9 March 2017, <http://www.mercycorps.org.uk/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>

3 See, for example, R. Erlich, Inside Syria: The backstory of their civil war and what the world can expect, New York: Prometheus Books, 2014; and R. Yassin-Kassab and L. Al-Shami, Burning country: Syrians in revolution and war, London: Pluto Press, 2016.

4 For instance, analyses about the Syrian conflict have at times overemphasised sectarianism. See, for example, J. Olmert, The prevalence of sectarianism: Hezbollah and the Syrian civil war, Fair Observer, 27 May 2013, https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/prevalence-sectarianism-hezbollah-syrian-civil-war

5 For an assessment of resilience factors, see M. Aubrey, R. Aubrey, F. Brodrick and C. Brooks, Why young Syrians choose to fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria, London: International Alert, 2016, <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/why-young-syrians-choose-fight>



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A man displaced by the war walks among bombed-out buildings in downtown Homs, Syria, 2014.

Nonetheless, many of the underlying gender dynamics described in this report that affect the lives of individual Syrians have not changed. Understanding the gendered impacts and dynamics of the Syrian War is not only important in terms of responding to the needs of Syrians in the immediate context of the war. Recognising how it has affected different women, men, girls, boys and those with other gender identities will also be essential to post-war peacebuilding efforts, be it in terms of the reintegration of displaced populations and former combatants, providing psychosocial and other support, transitional justice or rebuilding social cohesion more broadly.

2. Methodology

This report is the output of the research component of a broader peace education project, implemented by International Alert in partnership with Syrian and Lebanese organisations in Turkey, Lebanon and Syria, which was conducted between October 2015 and March 2016. The research aims to look at what drives young Syrians to join armed groups and the factors increasing their resilience to doing so. It is augmented by separate research carried out in Lebanon focusing on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) refugees.⁶

In **Syria**, the primary research involved 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) and two focus group discussions (FGDs), with four young men in the first group and two men and one woman in the second. Research was conducted in Aleppo city, Idlib governorate including Atmeh camp, and the Hasakah governorate in the north of the country, including the city of Qamishli. In total, 23 males and five females, aged 12–44, were interviewed.

In **Turkey**, primary research was conducted in Istanbul and Gaziantep. Four Syrian men aged 18–24 and two Syrian women aged 35–45 were interviewed. The social background of the respondents varied, including education levels, region of origin in Syria and being part of a female- or male-headed household.

In **Lebanon**, the primary research involved FGDs and KIIs. A total of 25 sex-disaggregated focus groups were conducted across Lebanon, focusing mainly on Syrian refugees, while a select few included teachers, male religious leaders, social workers and psychosocial trainers working directly with Syrian refugees in various parts of the country. The ages ranged between as young as 12 and over 30 years of age. A total of 242 people were reached, of whom 129 were male and 113 were female. Six KIIs were conducted just with Syrian male respondents, of whom three were conducted with minors aged 16–18, two with those aged under 25 and one with a male in his 40s. The research in Lebanon encompassed locations in Beirut, including the Palestinian camp Shatila; in the north including locations in and around Tripoli, Akkar and Koura; in the south including in and around Saida and Tyre; and the Bekaa Valley. Discussions were held in urban locations, including community centres and non-governmental organisation (NGO) offices, as well as in Palestinian and informal Syrian camps in rural areas across the country.

The research on the experiences of SGM refugees was conducted between September and November 2015 as part of a larger research project by Alert on conflict-affected SGM people.⁷ The FGDs included Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian LGBTI persons in Beirut. In addition, a series of KIIs were conducted with national and international service providers.

Several research limitations are worth noting. First, time constraints and a lack of access meant that the primary research data in Syria are only focused on certain parts of the opposition-held north of the country, excluding ISIS-controlled territories. It was not possible to interview Syrians living in all settings. In Turkey, only urban refugees were interviewed, as access to the camps is severely restricted. In Syria, internally displaced and local residents were interviewed. The research data from Lebanon is quite diverse, including Syrians living in host communities but also in informal camps.

6 For an in-depth discussion of these findings, see H. Myrntinen and M. Daigle, *When merely existing is a risk: Sexual and gender minorities in conflict, displacement and peacebuilding*, London: International Alert, 2017; and H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, "Trust no one, beware of everyone": Vulnerabilities of LGBTI refugees in Lebanon, in J. Freedman, Z. Kivilcim and N. Özgür Baklacioğlu (eds.), *A gendered approach to the Syrian refugee crisis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017

7 In this study, the terms 'SGMs' and 'LGBTI' will be used interchangeably. The authors are fully aware that neither is a perfect fit and both come with their attendant problems, such as the term 'minorities' being seen as potentially discriminatory and the LGBTI acronym being seen by some as too Western-centric and not encompassing identities and practices falling outside of these categories.

In all three locations, but most strikingly in Syria and Turkey, interviewing girls and women for the research was a challenge. This is mainly due to the security situation and the limited mobility of women, making it more difficult to access them in the first place. Furthermore, given the demographic complexity of Syria, the research was not able to cover all population groups, such as Palestinians, Druze or Armenians, who in part face different kinds of challenges compared with the other populations.

3. Conceptual framework: Defining 'gender'

3.1 Broader and deeper understanding of gender relations

International Alert considers the understanding of the interplay between gender and violent conflict in a given context as an essential prerequisite for successful peacebuilding.⁸ The gendered norms and expectations that guide the lives of women and girls, men and boys, as well as those identifying outside of the gender binary, are affected differently by conflict, and these norms and expectations themselves are changed by conflict. This means that people's vulnerabilities, needs and experiences can in part be very different in situations of violent conflict and displacement depending on their gender identity.

Gender, as central as it is, is not the only category defining the parameters of agency and vulnerability faced by individuals. Rather, it interacts with other factors such as age, social class, disability, ethnic or religious background, marital status or geographical location, with individual and situational factors also playing a role. Failing to adequately understand these differences means that any analysis of causes or consequences of conflict will be skewed, while programming will not be inclusive and not have the intended impact. Rather than envisioning categories of 'men' and 'women' in static and homogenous ways, gender norms and roles change over time, especially in contexts of conflict and displacement.

Individuals will also have multiple roles and relationships, be it as marital partners, family members, peers or economic actors – and as such these roles will also affect the expectations governing the lives of their partners, family members, peers and others. In a context such as Syria, individual identities are often closely intertwined with broader identities, in particular the family.⁹ Vulnerability is not an inherent condition of any person, but rather a result of societal dynamics and expectations. As Lewis Turner puts it, "[u]ltimately, a person is not vulnerable because they are a man or a woman, but because of what being a man or a woman means in particular situations. A person is made vulnerable by the circumstances, challenges and threats they face."¹⁰

3.2 Examining masculinities

Men and boys make up the vast majority of combatants and military leaders globally. However, despite this, the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys in conflict-affected situations are rarely examined from a gender perspective, meaning that they are too often not considered in terms of their socially constructed masculine identities. A growing body of research¹¹ suggests that gender roles, and patriarchal¹² notions of masculinity in particular, can fuel conflict and insecurity, motivating men to participate in violence and women to support them or even pressure them to do so. The promotion of violent masculinities can be used to recruit combatants, not least by presenting violence as an acceptable or celebrated means of "being a man", such as through having

8 H. Myrntinen, J. Naujoks and J. El-Bushra, Re-thinking gender in peacebuilding, London: International Alert, 2014, p.10, <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/rethinking-gender-peacebuilding>

9 Syria Research and Evaluation Organization (SREO), Rupture, remembrance, resiliency: The impact of displacement on Syrian women refugees in Turkey, Gaziantep: SREO, 2013, p. 12

10 L. Turner, Are Syrian men vulnerable too? Gendering the Syria refugee response, Middle East Institute, 29 November 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/are-syrian-men-vulnerable-too-gendering-syria-refugee-response>

11 E. O'Gorman, Women, peace and security: The gendering of international conflict and development, in E. O'Gorman, Conflict and development: Development matters, London: Zed Books, 2011; T. Bouta, G. Frerks and I. Bannon, Gender, conflict, and development, Washington DC: World Bank, 2005, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTICPR/Resources/30494GenderConflictandDevelopment.pdf>; L. Ouzgane, Islamic masculinities, London: Zed Books, 2006

12 Patriarchy is defined here as "the privileging of males and seniors and the legitimating of those privileges in the morality and idiom of kinship". See: S. Joseph, Problematizing gender and relational rights: Experience from Lebanon, Social Politics, 1(3), 1994, pp.271–85



Credit: © PixelPro/Alamy Stock Photo

A Free Syrian Army fighter looks out at the destruction on 'sniper alley' in Aleppo, Syria, 2012.

decision-making power, being a 'protector' or earning an income.¹³ However, even in times of mass mobilisation of men and boys, only a minority of men will actually be active combatants – most men will not be part of the fighting force.

Both women and men help to construct and uphold gender norms that fuel conflict and violence. Thus, understanding masculinities should always go hand in hand with understanding femininities. The gender roles prescribed to women can help fuel violent conflict, by casting women as weak and defenceless and thus requiring protection from men.¹⁴ However, women also often reproduce patriarchal notions of masculinity, for example, by encouraging or expecting men to join armed groups or by shaming those who choose not to take part in the fighting.

Too often, men aged 15–55, but especially young men, are seen by virtue of their gender as potential combatants.¹⁵ This demographic characterisation means that even if a man does not have weapons and is not engaged in fighting, he is assumed, at the very least, to be willing to fight and is therefore viewed either as an asset or as a threat – to the government, the opposition movements or the governments of host countries.¹⁶ Men 'of fighting age' are not seen as neutral civilians, in the same way that women, children and the elderly are perceived to be. Men and boys can and have been subjected to sexual violence, in particular in settings of detention and interrogation.¹⁷

13 This paragraph draws on H. Wright, *Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: Perspectives on men through a gender lens*, London: Saferworld, 2014, p.6, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/862-masculinities-conflict-and-peacebuilding-perspectives-on-men-through-a-gender-lens>

14 *Ibid*, p.16

15 R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, *Gender, conscription and protection, and the war in Syria*, *The Syria crisis, displacement and protection*, *Forced Migration Review*, September 2014, p.35, <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/syria/davis-taylor-murphy.pdf>

16 *Ibid*, p.37

17 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/28/69, Geneva: UN OHCHR, 2015, para. 55

In the Syrian refugee context, men's vulnerabilities have arguably not been given the same degree of consideration as those of women and girls, who tend to be seen theoretically as the most vulnerable, without a closer examination of different men's positionalities or differentiating between different women.¹⁸ This research helps to fill some of the current knowledge gaps on how ideals of masculinity interact with other social, economic and political factors to make taking up arms appear as a positive or necessary option for men and boys in the current Syrian context.¹⁹

3.3 Examining femininities

Over the past decades, questions pertaining to women, peace and security have increasingly been integrated into initiatives at the international and local levels, aiming to address the needs and ensuring the protection and participation of women and girls in conflict-affected situations. However, these efforts are often framed and understood in a narrow way, treating women as a homogenous group and not recognising differences based on social class, age, urban-rural dynamics and ethnic or national identity. While assistance providers have laudably and importantly addressed women as "vulnerable victims of war" who need support, they have been more sceptical to supporting women in their capacity to be active shapers of their own lives.²⁰ This has partly reinforced perceptions of women as "victims in war" only and of men as "perpetrators of violence", which are not accurate.²¹ Women in Syria have participated directly as combatants as well as supporting combat operations in other ways, such as logistical support, and have also encouraged others to do so. As with men, however, there are also many women and girls who refuse to engage in violence and are instead active in peacebuilding efforts.²²

In Syria, as elsewhere, women and girls have been more likely than men and boys to be victims of conflict-related SGBV, perpetrated by armed actors as well as civilians. This has included EFM, including of refugee girls and women, but also rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence.²³ Moreover, women are more affected by the indirect effects of economic changes, such as increases in food prices, as well as of displacement.²⁴ During conflict and displacement, patterns of mobility and lifestyles change, thereby forcing women and men to redefine core aspects of their identities and stop enacting the roles that have previously enabled them to be 'masculine' or 'feminine'.²⁵ For instance, women may be forced to take on more income-generating activities and responsibilities, be more active in the public sphere and make family decisions, in addition to continuing to take care of their families.²⁶ While this adds to women's vulnerabilities during conflict and displacement, it can also present an opportunity for empowerment. However, more work should be done to support positive attitudes towards gender equality, as an increase in income-generating activities for women does not automatically lead to a more equal society.

18 M. Quist, *Traumatic masculinities: The disconnect between the feminized policies and practices of humanitarian aid and the gendered reality of Syrian refugee life in settlements in Lebanon*, MSc Thesis, Utrecht University, 2016; L. Turner, 2016, *Op. cit.*

19 R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, 2014, *Op. cit.*, p.38

20 J. El-Bushra, *Gender and forced migration: Editorial*, in M. Couldrey and T. Morris (eds.), *Gender and displacement*, *Forced Migration Review*, Refugee Studies Centre in association with the Norwegian Refugee Council/Global IDP Project, 2000, <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/FMRpdfs/FMR09/fmr9full.pdf>

21 H. Myrntinen, J. Naujoks and J. El-Bushra, 2014, *Op. cit.*, p.12

22 *Ibid.*

23 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, *Shifting sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut: Abaad – Resource Centre for Gender Equality/Oxfam, 2013, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/shifting-sands-changing-gender-roles-among-refugees-in-lebanon-300408>

24 A. L. Strachan and H. Haider, *Gender and conflict: Topic guide*, GSDRC, International Development Department, College of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, 2015, <http://www.gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender-and-conflict/relationship-between-gender-and-conflict-the-evidence/impact-of-conflict-on-gender>

25 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, *Op. cit.*

26 *Ibid.*

3.4 Examining sexual and gender minorities

Questions of SOGIs that do not fall into the binary categories of women and men or do not adhere to heteronormative social expectations have been largely absent from gender, peacebuilding and conflict research, policy and programming. However, identifying – or being identified by others – as LGBTI or other diverse SOGIs often adds additional layers of vulnerability to lives already under threat in situations of violent conflict and displacement, where pre-existing conditions of discrimination, exclusion, repression and violence are heightened and exacerbated.²⁷ The perpetrators include those driven by secular and non-secular forms of extremist thought that often precipitates and inflames civil and interstate conflicts, and also armed security actors such as militaries, police and rebel factions.²⁸

Vulnerabilities faced by SGMs are bound to the currents of social exclusion and discrimination that condition their lives – and that may be amplified by conflict. This means that more than other members of society, people of diverse SOGIs also face violence and discrimination from civilians, including in some cases from their own family members. Furthermore, the onset of conflict, such as natural disasters, also often leads to the loss and collapse of informal and often clandestine community or peer support systems, increasing SGM individuals' vulnerability.²⁹ In situations of displacement, SGMs face specific challenges that include dealing with the physical and emotional trauma of war and displacement, often compounded by the need to hide one's SOGI; harassment, pressure and violence from security services, host communities and other refugees; and a lack of access to economic opportunities, services and aid.³⁰

27 H. Myrtilinen and M. Daigle, 2017, Op. cit.

28 H. Myrtilinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

29 Ibid; for disasters, see J. Rumbach and K. Knight, Sexual and gender minorities in humanitarian emergencies, in L.W. Roeder (ed.), Issues of gender and sexual orientation in humanitarian emergencies: Risks and risk reduction, Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2014, pp.33–74

30 H. Myrtilinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

4. Gender and power relations in Syria prior to the conflict

While violent conflict can and does open up new social roles for men, women, boys and girls – or more often forces these upon individuals – it also simultaneously exacerbates pre-existing power inequalities. Thus, examining the different gendered positions of power, agency and vulnerability during conflict also requires an examination of the pre-conflict situation.

4.1 A gendered legal framework

In order to make sense of gendered developments in Syria and neighbouring countries, it is helpful to understand gender relations before the crisis. Women in Syria were subjected to discrimination in both law and practice. While the Syrian constitution guarantees gender equality in Article 45: "The State guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to participate fully and effectively in political, social, cultural and economic life", provisions that discriminate against women still exist in various laws relating to the family and women's personal lives, such as the Nationality Act, the Personal Status Act and the Penal Code.³¹ The main articles discriminating against women in the Syrian Personal Law relate to "the legal age of marriage (18 for boys and 16 for girls), guardianship and consent to marry, prohibition for women to marry non-Muslims, polygamy, divorce and repudiation that is largely a male prerogative, limited child custody rights for the mother and the obligation for a wife to obey her husband in return for maintenance".³²

Syria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, but filed several reservations including prohibiting women to pass on citizenship to their children and having discriminatory provisions in the penal code, with women facing more severe punishment for adultery.³³ Syria has a mixed legal system including both secular civil courts and religious courts, the latter dealing with personal status matters, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody, among others. Laws associated with these assign inferior status to women as compared with men.³⁴ As an example, a woman's husband can forbid her from working outside the home or from leaving Syria if accompanied by her children. It is also worth noting that religious minorities apply their own laws in many of these cases.³⁵

These legal inequalities constitute an issue of major importance today, as many female-headed Syrian households both in Syria and neighbouring countries cannot provide the citizenship to their children, leaving them without the required certifications and access to services. For Syrian babies born outside the country, acquiring a birth certificate that records the Syrian father's name is important, because Syrian nationality law only permits children who are born outside the country to claim citizenship through their father.³⁶ Yet, tens of thousands of Syrian births have and are occurring without the presence and/or official proof of a Syrian father. Exiled Syrian children are at a heightened risk of statelessness, and not having adequate proof of identification makes it more difficult for them to access services such as education and healthcare.³⁷

31 EuroMed, National situation analysis report: Women's human rights and gender equality – Syria, Enhancing Equality between Men and Women in the EuroMed region (2008–2011) Programme, July 2010, https://docs.euromedwomen.foundation/files/ermwf-documents/5668_2.139.nationalsituationanalysis-syria.pdf

32 Ibid.

33 S. Kelly and J. Breslin, *Women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid resistance*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, p.460

34 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, Op. cit., p.9; Syrian Arab Republic, Social Institutions & Gender Index, <http://www.genderindex.org/country/syrian-arab-republic>, accessed 15 January 2017

35 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, Op. cit., p.9

36 S. Reynolds and T. Duos, A generation of Syrians born in exile risk a future of statelessness, European Network on Statelessness, 15 July 2015, <http://www.statelessness.eu/blog/generation-syrians-born-exile-risk-future-statelessness>

37 Ibid. Other reasons for not registering children are a lack of financial means or fear of officials, especially if the mother and/or father are not legally registered.

4.2 Gendered societal inequalities

Women in Syria were arguably vulnerable to SGBV both inside and outside the home, as a result of patriarchal values in society and an authoritarian political system.³⁸ In November 2011, a joint study by the government and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that one in three women suffered from domestic violence in Syria.³⁹ While state feminism was practised, and girls' literacy levels and the number of women in public sector jobs were on the rise,⁴⁰ the progress in women's rights was very minimal. Prior to the conflict, a division in gender roles between women and men was the norm in Syria. Women undertook most of the domestic chores, even if they were employed, while men were mainly responsible for financially supporting the nuclear as well as the extended family.

Women's decision-making in the private sphere was also limited. A 1999 socio-economic survey led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UNFPA found that "decision-making regarding household issues such as education and marriage of children as well as household expenditure was in most cases the privilege of male heads of households within the patriarchal structure of family".⁴¹ Thus, while men also faced discrimination due to social norms, legal and societal restrictions related to family and socio-economic life impacted women disproportionately.⁴²

The constellation of pre-war Syrian society was very heterogeneous, with ethnic, religious, urban-rural and social class differences. The life of a young woman from the upper-middle class in urban Damascus would have been starkly different to that of a young woman living in a rural area in the north. In 2010, 70% of women in rural areas were often working over 15 hours a day, undertaking household chores and working in the agricultural sector.⁴³ The pressures on girls and women to provide unpaid domestic and agricultural labour, coupled with the phenomenon of EFM that was already common especially among rural communities, meant that they were among the most marginalised and did not enjoy the same access to services and participation in the public sphere as women in urban areas.⁴⁴

Older women enjoyed considerable influence over younger generations in the household and in private settings, including over younger male family members. For instance, it was (and is) quite common for mothers to play an important role in choosing a bride for their sons.⁴⁵ Different layers of power existed within the population of Syria itself. The Kurdish ethnic minority located mostly in the northeast and making up 10% of the total population was suffering from identity-based discrimination, leaving it effectively stateless and with restricted access to social and economic rights.⁴⁶ A significant number of Palestinian⁴⁷ and Iraqi⁴⁸ refugees also reside in Syria, who face their own gendered experiences such as socio-economic and legal precariousness. This wide diversity meant – and means – that the war-affected Syrian society was anything but homogenous.

38 S. Kelly and J. Breslin, 2010, Op. cit.

39 Amnesty International, Annual report: Syria 2011, London: Amnesty International, 2011, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/annual-report-syria-2011?page=show>

40 "Government policies have also encouraged women's education and participation in the workforce. Reflecting these measures, women's literacy increased from 37 percent in 1981 to 76 percent in 2007, while women's labour participation rates grew from 12 percent to 31 percent during the same period." See: S. Kelly and J. Breslin, 2010, Op. cit., p.459

41 Ibid; EuroMed, 2010, Op. cit., p.29

42 Syria: No exceptions for 'honour killings': Penal code change positive, but it still eases punishment for some who murder women, Human Rights Watch, 28 July 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/07/28/syria-no-exceptions-honor-killings>

43 S. Kelly and J. Breslin, 2010, Op. cit., p.473

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid, p.479

46 Amnesty International, 2011, Op. cit.

47 "Palestine refugees remain particularly vulnerable and have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, due to their proximity to conflict areas inside Syria, high rates of poverty, and the tenuous legal status of those forced to flee to Lebanon and Jordan." An estimated 450,000 of the 560,000 refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Syria remain in the country, over two-thirds (280,000) are internally displaced and an estimated 95 per cent (430,000) are in need of sustained humanitarian assistance in order to survive. See: The Syria crisis, UNRWA, <http://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis#Syria-Crisis-and-Palestine-refugees>, accessed 17 January 2017; M. Abu Moghli, Palestine refugees in Syria: A recurring tragedy, The Elders, 27 November 2015, <http://theelders.org/article/palestine-refugees-syria-recurring-tragedy>

48 "By year's end, Syria hosted around 1.2 million Iraqi refugees [and] more than 550,000 Palestinian refugees." See: United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), World refugee survey 2009: Syria, Arlington, VA: USCRI, 2009, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4a40d2b3a.html>



Credit: © Jim Grover/Alamy Stock Photo

A woman carries freshly-baked flatbreads outside a backstreet bakery in the old city of Damascus, Syria, 2010.

An element that is often neglected in analyses is the importance of clan structures, adding another layer of identity, especially in the north of Syria where this report’s primary research was conducted. While there have been major migration movements towards the cities over the past decades, resulting in the intermingling between urban and clan structures, clan networks remain important.⁴⁹ Over the past decades, the Syrian government has carefully constructed a patronage system with specific kinship groups within clan networks, pitting them against each other to ensure its rule.⁵⁰

Given dominant social and religious mores as well as a legal situation that criminalises homosexual practices, life for many SGMs was precarious prior to the war. This was especially the case for those on the lower end of the socio-economic scale, those who were seen as ‘too conspicuously’ non-heterosexual, and those lacking requisite social and political connections (or *wasta* in Arabic). For SGM people, urban areas, in particular Damascus, offered limited opportunities for essentially having double lives – living according to dominant heterosexual norms, while engaging with an underground ‘scene’ or community.⁵¹ A large proportion of the Syrian respondents taking part in the SGM research, especially bisexual and lesbian women, were in seemingly ‘normal’ heterosexual marriages (as defined by dominant social norms), as women had and have less social leeway for being unmarried than younger men. Pre-war Syria also hosted LGBTI refugees, both Iraqi and Palestinian. However, according to a 2010 article, the Syrian state security apparatus began cracking down more intensely on Syrian and Iraqi refugee LGBTI communities about 6–12 months before the outbreak of the civil war.⁵²

49 For a more detailed reading on clan structures in northern Syria, see A. Al-Ayed, Tribal matters: Are Syria’s tribes being radicalised?, Arab Reform Initiative, 19 January 2015, <http://www.arab-reform.net/en/node/493>

50 International Alert-commissioned desk research report, A review of the recruitment into armed groups in the Syrian conflict and the potential for peace education, 2015, p.18 (for internal use only)

51 H. Myrtilinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

52 D. Littauer, Syria’s attack on gay people must end, The Guardian, 7 July 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/07/homosexual-syria-persecution-lgbt-rights>

4.3 War and its impacts

When protests erupted in Damascus and Deraa in early 2011 and quickly spread across to other cities in Syria, the response from the Syrian government was a heavy security crackdown. While the first few months of the 2011 protests stayed peaceful, they were increasingly met with violence, leading to civilians taking up arms to defend their communities, as well as to more organised armed resistance by autumn and winter. The heavily securitised response of the Syrian government to the nascent protest movement, including the arbitrary shelling of civilian populations and the detention and torture of protesters, heavily contributed to the escalation of the conflict into more violent responses.⁵³ It is worth noting that the gender inequalities at the societal level were quickly reflected in the political opposition movement itself. While women played an integral part in setting up Local Coordination Committees of Syria, for example, they were increasingly sidelined as the conflict became more protracted and decision-making structures solidified.⁵⁴

At the time of writing, there was a proliferation of armed groups fighting in Syria, including but not limited to:

- the government security forces supported by state actors – Iran, Russia, Iraq and China, in addition to numerous Shia militia organisations from Iraq, Hazara from Afghanistan and Lebanon-based Hezbollah;
- the loose amalgamation of opposition armed groups fighting under the banner of the FSA supported by the US, European states, Turkey and Gulf states;
- Islamist-oriented factions supported by non-state actors in the Gulf and Turkey such as Ahrar al-Sham and the previously al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front,⁵⁵ which has split ties from al-Qaeda in July 2016 and rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham;⁵⁶
- the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), or People's Protection Units, the armed wing of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD), or Democratic Union Party, including the all-female Women's Protection Units or Women's Defence Units (YPJ) in northern Syria; and
- the so-called ISIS.

4.4 A continuum of sexual and gender-based violence

As in many other conflicts, both civilians and combatants, regardless of their gender identity, face the threat of SGBV in the Syrian conflict. Given that the war is ongoing, it is not possible at this time to quantify the impact of the conflict on SGBV, but certain qualitative, gendered trends are emerging that correlate in part with other conflicts. Conflict-related SGBV can be seen as being a spectrum or continuum in several ways.⁵⁷

- **In terms of intensity and breadth:** While many of the various forms of SGBV encountered during the conflict existed prior to the conflict (including EFM, sexualised torture in spaces of detention, sexual extortion of LGBTI individuals, domestic violence, rape, 'honour' killings), these have changed in terms of their intensity and with the ebb and flow of the conflict.

53 International Crisis Group (ICG), Syria's metastasising conflicts, Middle East Report No. 143, Brussels: ICG, 2013, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/syria-s-metastasing-conflicts.pdf>

54 M. Kahf, Then and now: The Syrian revolution to date – A young nonviolent resistance and the ensuing armed struggle, Saint Paul, MN: Friends for a Nonviolent World, 2013, pp.1–35

55 Since the field research was conducted between November 2015 and February 2016, this report will refer to al-Nusra Front, as well as the armed group's new name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

56 Syrian Nusra Front announces split from Al-Qaeda, BBC World, 29 July 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36916606>

57 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, Op. cit.; H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.; UN OHCHR, 2015, Op. cit.

- **In terms of forms:** While much of the international focus has been on some of the more 'spectacular' forms of SGBV such as the use of sexual slavery by ISIS or the use of rape as a "weapon of war",⁵⁸ these are unfortunately only a part of a very broad range of violent forms perpetrated by armed actors and also by civilians.
- **In terms of a continuum across space and time:** Leaving a zone of active conflict does not automatically mean an end to the exposure to SGBV and SEA. Syrian refugees of all gender identities, and heavily influenced by this, continue to face risks during their flight, as well as in refugee camps and settlements, be they from armed actors, officials, fellow refugees or members of the host community.

Gender plays a key role in terms of the vulnerability to particular forms of SGBV in specific locations. Sexual violence is used by various conflict parties against men and boys as well as against women and girls in spaces of detention; EFM is of a particular concern for younger women and girls; women and girls, but also younger boys, face sexual predation in refugee camps; and both sexual extortion and 'honour' killings tend to target more women and girls, gay men and transgender women and men rather than heterosexual men.⁵⁹

Gender also plays a role in the reporting of SGBV, and a lack thereof, and how third parties (e.g. relief agencies, NGOs, state actors) respond or do not respond to cases of violence. In the Syrian context, as in many other contexts, the stigma of SGBV tends to be attached to the victim/survivor rather than the perpetrator, and reporting may bring with it the risk of further violence from the perpetrators, community or even family members. Agencies and organisations dealing with refugee response may not be aware of the risks of SGBV and SEA. This seems to be especially the case in terms of understanding the risks faced by men and boys in this respect, as well as the particular needs of LGBTI refugees, although awareness is slowly increasing.⁶⁰

58 See, for example, S. Meger, *Rape loot pillage: The political economy of sexual violence in armed conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; and D.E. Buss, *Rethinking 'rape as a weapon of war'*, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 17(2), 2009, pp.145–163

59 Ibid; interview with an international SGBV investigator working on Syria, 23 February 2017

60 H. Myrtilinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.; interview with an international SGBV investigator working on Syria, 23 February 2017

5. Gendering conflict experiences and susceptibility to recruitment into armed groups in Syria

In the following section, the gendered factors that act as push and pull factors for some Syrian men and women to join armed groups will be analysed. Foreign fighters will not be addressed as, in spite of some overlap such as grievances and peer-to-peer recruitment, they tend to have a different set of motivating factors from locally recruited Syrians for joining armed groups on the state or the opposition side. Foreign fighters also have quite different motivations and trajectories among themselves. For example, European citizens who become radicalised online and join ISIS have a different set of reasons to their co-citizens volunteering to join the YPG, and these are yet again quite different to Afghan Hazaras recruited in refugee camps in Iran to fight on the government side, or North Africans and Central Asians joining ISIS.⁶¹

As in this research economic survival and political grievances against the al-Assad government figured much higher than ideological reasons in the respondents' answers, these will be given prominence in the analysis below. That is not to say, however, that some fighters, and especially higher-level leaders, are not also motivated by ideological reasons or sectarianism.

5.1 Political opposition and gendered dynamics

Prevailing narratives and justifications of Syrians' involvement in the conflict are strongly shaped by the history and nature of the political situation in Syria, as well as their disproportionately violent response to the early peaceful protests in 2011. The current system's decades-long authoritarian rule has significantly shaped the way in which Syrian society and the individuals who constitute it have been socialised to operate. The context of the 'Arab Spring' in what seemed to be the successful toppling of authoritarian governments in Tunisia and Egypt, coupled with decades-long frustrations with a lack of political rights in Syria, created strong motivations for protesting against the government. Respondents highlight that the government's violent response to Syrians' calls for more political rights was the main reason for the take up of arms and the creation of an armed resistance. For instance, two young adult male respondents in Aleppo affiliated with the FSA stated: "we do not like destruction but the regime obliged us to resort to weapons because it used violence" and "we started a peaceful revolution but the regime pushed us to carry weapons and fight its brutality."⁶²

Moreover, those who joined an armed group in late 2011 and 2012 did so for different reasons than those who joined in 2014 and onwards.⁶³ Those who engaged earlier on were in most part active in protests in 2011, after which the Syrian government targeted their villages and towns, especially in the north of the country.⁶⁴ As the conflict escalated and violence became a more pervasive element in daily life, the initial spirit of self-defence decreased and more men and boys started joining armed groups because of limited social and economic options or the need to provide for their families.

61 See, for example, D.L. Byman, The homecomings: What happens when Arab foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria return?, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(8), 2015, pp.581–602; ICG, Syria calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia, Briefing No. 72, Bishkek/Brussels: ICG, 2015; N. Costello, War on Isis: Western fighters joining Kurds to fight terror group in Iraq and Syria, *The Independent*, 21 May 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/western-fighters-joining-the-kurds-to-fight-isis-in-iraq-and-syria-a7041136.html>; K. Fahim, Afghans go to Syria to fight for its government, and anguished results, *The New York Times*, 28 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/world/asia/afghanistan-syria-army-war.html?_r=0

62 Interviews with young Syrian men, Aleppo, December 2015

63 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

64 Ibid.

"Nothing helped young men to [cope with the impact of the conflict] except their determination to fulfil the revolution's demands and stand in the face of violence." – Young male FSA fighter, Aleppo, Syria

While this research only looked at opposition-held areas in the north, it is also important to analyse the dynamics inside government-controlled areas of Syria and those under ISIS rule. For the most part, men in government-controlled areas, regardless of their beliefs or politics, face conscription at 18 years of age; they can be exempted or designated to a certain type of service for a limited number of reasons, including if he is the only son in a family or if he has a serious health issue. One can also pay to be exempted from service and in 2013 the government raised the fee from US\$ 7,500 to US\$ 15,000, making it potentially more difficult for young men from the middle class to avoid conscription. As policies kept changing and were oftentimes applied arbitrarily, trying to navigate the system legally was risky, leading many military-age Syrian men to flee both military conscription and service following the creation of the FSA in late July 2011 and the intensification of the government's violent crackdown throughout the country.⁶⁵

Political opposition to the Syrian government is a strong undercurrent running through all of the opposition-affiliated respondents' answers – both women and men.⁶⁶ This view is framed through the need to defend the local community from shelling and acts of violence from the government, but also through limiting the interference of perceived external actors to the conflict. Some of the Syrians who took part in the protests in early 2011 eventually formed armed battalions and groups to defend their communities from government attacks.⁶⁷ Army deserters based in Turkey formed the FSA in August 2011 and armed groups that began appearing all over the country adopted its banner relatively quickly.⁶⁸

While the FSA enjoyed a more positive reputation and legitimacy among those who were against the Syrian government at the beginning of the uprising,⁶⁹ it remained a loose network of brigades rather than a unified fighting force. The FSA was and is until now perceived by some as a more 'moderate' faction in the conflict, as its main aim was to defend the communities from government forces. Many respondents see FSA members as "heroes", and those who have died as "martyrs".⁷⁰

"Our role is to protect the community militarily and fulfil the civic duties and needs. Our hopes are to provide a decent life for the Syrian people away from violence and to build the new Syria that maintains the rights and freedoms of everyone." – Young Syrian male affiliated with the FSA, Aleppo, Syria

It is important to note that the peaceful protests followed by the armed confrontations opened up avenues for the general population, but especially young people, to affirm agency that had been suppressed for a long time by a controlled and rigid social organisation. The latter restricted the space for the expression of alternative political viewpoints. For example, one young male respondent from Aleppo affiliated with the FSA explained that through the conflict he has become "a free man with freedom of expression [with] the ability to say the [truth] and fight corruption and injustice".⁷¹

Membership of an armed group becomes an avenue for achieving personal significance and enjoying previously denied agency. Research from other conflict contexts has highlighted how joining an armed group can represent an appealing option for civilian men to "recover lost masculinity",⁷² providing them with the opportunity to earn an

65 Information in entire paragraph from R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, 2014, Op. cit., p.35

66 Due to a lack of time and access, Syrians in government-held territory or state security forces were not interviewed.

67 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

68 Guide to the Syrian rebels, BBC News, 13 December 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

69 Ibid.

70 Interviews with young Syrian men and women, October – December 2015. The word 'martyr' in Arabic does not necessarily have religious or theological association, and is also commonly used in reference to political causes.

71 Interview with a young Syrian man, November 2015

72 Saferworld, 2014, Op. cit., p.11

income and to achieve status, including as a protector of the land, the community and the family.⁷³ In particular, in terms of protecting the 'honour of women', but also in terms of cracking down on men, boys and other gender identities deemed to be 'non-conforming', this has shifted to an increasingly rigid policing of gender norms in the community, especially by the more socially conservative groups. A further possible motivating factor coming out of other research on young men – and to an extent women – is the possibility of escaping gerontocratic and patriarchal social and family structures into group structures that are seemingly more egalitarian, more meritocratic and made up of people from roughly the same age group, led by charismatic peers.⁷⁴ Participation in the armed struggle has, in other conflicts in the region, given younger men status and societal decision-making power usually reserved for older men.⁷⁵

While all respondents stress political opposition, only a number of them are engaged in armed factions or are in favour of violence as a tool to achieve political change. While political motivation is important to justify the need to resort to violence, be it to oppose or support the Syrian government, interviewees expressed it as being the last resort, with the initial aim of self-defence. Political motivation by itself also does not create a push factor to join armed groups, as many opponents have instead chosen to flee or to express their opposition through non-violent means. Further variables such as social and economic dimensions need to be examined to fully understand the gendered trajectories of recruitment into different armed groups.

Areas where the FSA or local councils were in charge were perceived as safe havens for those fleeing conscription or those who deserted the Syrian army.⁷⁶ From 2013, Islamist groups got a stronger hold of these areas, leading to intensified recruitment and indoctrination campaigns for young boys and men, as well as targeted killings of non-violent activists. This resulted in the Syrian government extending its indiscriminate bombing campaigns, leading to another group of men having to flee a second time and this time across Syria's borders.⁷⁷

5.2 Gendering societal factors that facilitate recruitment into armed groups

The conflict reinforced gendered social norms that were already dominant in Syria. In the rural north of the country, such as the Idlib and Hasakah governorates where this research was conducted, many men have been drawn into armed fighting. Notions of men as 'natural' protectors of the 'weaker' women and children, expectations of men to be 'in control' of 'their' women, coupled with the assumption that men are naturally prepared to use violence, or that it is their duty to do so on behalf of their community, makes them (and particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) more susceptible to recruitment into armed groups.⁷⁸

Syrian women but especially men were socialised into a military culture throughout the Ba'ath rule. One way this materialised was through compulsory military education embedded in the Syrian curriculum, both in private and public schools, as well as through a compulsory military service of two years after graduation from school for young men only. While women and men were both included in the military culture, the military as an apparatus

73 M. Aubrey, R. Aubrey, F. Brodrick and C. Brooks, 2016, Op. cit., p.12

74 Perhaps interestingly from this point of view, Islamist nasheeds eulogising participation in violent jihad tend to stress 'brotherly' bonds of emotion between fighters, highlight the valour of idolised leaders or, less frequently, be addressed to mothers and sisters to alleviate their grieving, but tend not to mention fathers. See: B. Said, *Hymns des Jihads: Naschids im Kontext jihadistischer Mobilisierung* [Hymns of jihad: Nasheed in the context of jihadist mobilisation], Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016; S. Schröter, *The young wild ones of the ummah: Heroic gender constructs in jihadism*, in *Friedensgutachten*, Berlin: Lit, 2015. For a theoretical framing of a move towards Islamist patriarchy, see H. Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A theory of distorted change in Arab society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993

75 For such dynamics in Palestine, see J. Peteet, *Male gender and rituals of resistance in the Palestinian intifada: A cultural politics of violence*, *American Ethnologist*, 21(1), 1994, pp.31–49

76 R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, 2014, Op. cit., p.36

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.



Credit: © PixelPro/Alamy Stock Photo

Free Syrian Army fighters walk through the streets of Aleppo, Syria, 2012.

was strongly male dominated and marked by class hierarchies. For example, young men from middle and upper classes avoided conscription or took on higher-ranking positions within the army.⁷⁹

"I feel hugely supported by my friends and my military faction members." – Young man, Aleppo, Syria

Social expectations placed by peers seem to constitute a driver of recruitment into armed groups. Respondents highlighted that peer-to-peer relations are stronger than they used to be, and these close bonds between young men of the same age indicates that peer dynamics as well as charismatic role models could indeed play an important role in encouraging young men to join an armed group. A 2014 UN report found that peer pressure was a key factor leading to recruitment of young boys into armed groups, among a lack of education and economic opportunities, with many boys stating "that they felt it was their duty to join the opposition".⁸⁰

The difficulty of achieving 'manhood' through traditional means opens the door for finding alternative ways to achieving it.⁸¹ Many male respondents interviewed in Syria associated their wish for a different Syria in the future with a desire of fulfilling traditional gender norms, namely starting a family and finding a job. While the respondents explain they are proud to be fighting and defending their communities, a number of them express the desire to lead a more normalised life by fulfilling traditional, non-militarised ways of being men.

"Most young men prefer going back to their houses, since these are the only places where they do not feel discrimination." – Young man affiliated with the FSA, Aleppo, Syria

As the level of violence dramatically increased year by year and the FSA was chronically underfunded, other armed groups emerged and started imposing a more conservative view on social and cultural life, and wrongly

79 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

80 UN decries child abuse in Syria, Al Jazeera English, 6 February 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/un-decries-child-abuse-syria-2014253588210756.html>

81 Saferworld, 2014, Op. cit., p.11

justifying violent actions and inequalities through narrow religious interpretations.⁸² These included, for example, al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh e-Islam. Men who were initially fighting with the FSA shifted towards those more socially conservative groups around 2013, while others stopped fighting altogether and fled to neighbouring countries.

The FSA's lack of resources has led to an increase in corruption and participation in the war economy among its ranks. Male respondents in Syria who are associated with the FSA stated their resentment to the widespread corruption and unlawful dealings. On the other hand, al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was known for being well structured and disciplined. The appeal of more socially conservative groups such as al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are linked to the real and perceived power they have both in terms of availability of weapons and funds, and good reputation of disciplined fighters.

Moreover, al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham has gained grassroots support by providing basic services for the communities it controls, mainly supplying bread and other humanitarian assistance.⁸³ While al-Nusra was officially affiliated with al-Qaeda at the time of the research, some members did not necessarily sympathise or agree with the ideological underpinnings of the group.

Respondents interviewed in Syria all stated their strong dislike of ISIS, which is referred to as non-Syrian and foreign.⁸⁴ Tensions between foreign fighters and Syrians who are part of ISIS but who are also part of communities likewise reflect power dynamics. While fighters from the European provenance play a more prominent role in European-language propaganda and receive more generous 'packages' such as living allowances and houses, their lack of Arabic language skills and fighting experience means that they are not in the upper leadership of the group, in contrast to Chechens, Tunisians and Saudis, for example.⁸⁵ While ISIS has placed foreign fighters as the face of the group, al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham has always put Syrians at the forefront in any territory they held. Although the group also has a number of foreign fighters, it appears as a 'Syrian' armed group, therefore giving it more credibility or community acceptance, to some degree.⁸⁶

In Hasakah governorate, which is predominantly Kurdish, violence and instability are also widespread. However, local power dynamics differ, as the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, are dominant. All Kurdish respondents either referred to, supported or belonged to the PYD and were not associated with any other armed group than the YPG. The YPG has effectively monopolised violence in areas under its control and subordinated other Kurdish armed groups and non-Kurdish fighters. The Kurdish ethnic dimension is essential in relation to the PYD and YPG, as it builds on decades of resistance against the Syrian government and fight for self-governance.

5.3 Understanding economic vulnerabilities

In March 2015, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research indicated that Syria's economic foundations were in a state of "systematic collapse and destruction", with almost three million Syrians having lost their jobs during the conflict,⁸⁷ meaning that more than 13.8 million Syrians lost their sources of livelihood.⁸⁸ The lack of security, the allocation of all resources to the fighting, the creation of violence-related job opportunities and the imposition

82 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

83 R. Sherlock, Syria: How jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra is taking over Syria's revolution, The Telegraph, 8 February 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9857846/Syria-how-jihadist-group-Jabhat-al-Nusra-is-taking-over-Syrias-revolution.html>

84 ISIS supporters or people from ISIS-controlled territories, who might have expressed different views, were not interviewed as part of this study.

85 K. Leigh, For European jihadi fighters, a raise in profile – but no promotion, Syria Deeply, 29 August 2014, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/08/29/for-european-jihadi-fighters-a-raise-in-profile-but-no-promotion>

86 Ibid.

87 Aid agencies slam UN Security Council over Syria, Al Jazeera English, 13 March 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/war-plunged-syrians-poverty-150312022852894.html>

88 I. Black, 2016, Op. cit.

of authority by force help to fuel the war economy.⁸⁹ Because of detention, displacement and armed groups seizing factories or shops, men, who are traditionally the primary breadwinners, cannot adequately provide for their families.

"The financial factor is what affects young people's decisions on family and life." – Young Syrian male internally displaced person (IDP), Atmeh camp, Syria

The acuteness of the lack of economic opportunities comes out very strongly among the answers of all respondents in Syria. Female respondents also frame the lack of economic opportunities in their answers as an issue for Syrian men specifically. Economic activity not directly linked to armed groups involves small-scale trading, including selling vegetables or other commodities. As economic opportunities are limited, male respondents who were linked to the FSA stated that they strongly depended on the income they received from their armed faction, although this was often not sufficient to meet the needs of their families and themselves.

One young man in Aleppo reported having to borrow money every month to keep supporting his family, as well as selling furniture and his share of the monthly food aid he receives from his military faction.⁹⁰ Many male respondents also admitted to asking for their monthly salaries in advance to make ends meet. The deteriorating situation has meant that armed groups have become key economic players, providing salaries, food and other benefits for fighters and their families. The war economy in both Iraq and Syria has meant that for many young men, the only feasible avenue of earning a regular income is through membership of an armed group.

"[Syrian men are] able to survive by joining a military faction either to receive salaries or for robbery." – Syrian male IDP, Idlib, Syria

The appeal of more socially conservative groups such as al-Nusra lies in the economic benefits that they provide to fighters as well as to their families, paying higher salaries and also providing better benefits to wives and children should a fighter die in combat. In the context of a collapsed economy and little opportunity for employment, belonging to an armed group offers the possibility of securing a regular income to support a household. The importance of livelihood strongly comes through the research, with one male respondent admitting that young men do change their armed group "based on who pays more".⁹¹ While the findings of the research in Syria are only indicative, it does support the view that the motivation to join an armed group is influenced by economic and livelihood considerations and not uniquely prompted by ideological or political motivations, or grievances against the other side. As such, joining an armed group becomes for many less about conviction but rather is one possible pathway for navigating a precarious terrain with few or no good options.⁹²

Furthermore, the structure of pre-war networks is integral to understanding the level of cohesion and resilience of armed groups, and the maintenance, protection and consolidation of social ties is a central tenet of how armed groups expand their organisational power during a conflict.⁹³ Islamist armed groups are perceived as being better equipped, led and organised, and therefore are seen as more capable of defeating the al-Assad regime, which remains the primary goal of Syrian rebels.⁹⁴ ISIS has been particularly effective in exploiting the war economy to its advantage and enticing recruits through attractive remuneration packages.

89 Ibid.

90 Interview with a Syrian man, Aleppo, December 2015

91 Ibid.

92 On social navigation in times of war, see, for example, M. Utas, *Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: Tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78(2), 2005, pp.403–430; and H.E. Vigh, *Navigating terrains of war: Youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006

93 P. Staniland, *Networks of rebellion: Explaining insurgent cohesion and collapse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014

94 V. Mironova, L. Mrie and S. Whitt, 2014, Op. cit.

In addition to older fighters who are heads of households, many young men and adolescent boys also find themselves forced to provide an income for their families. Children have been incentivised with monthly salaries of up to US\$ 135 per month.⁹⁵ Opposition armed groups have used boys as young as 14 years of age in support roles and boys as young as 15 years as fighters. Boys have been used to spy on hostile forces, act as snipers, treat the wounded on battlefields, ferry ammunition to battles during fighting and fight on the frontlines.⁹⁶ It is important not to downplay the importance of peer-to-peer relations in recruitment to armed groups, as some boys followed their older relatives and friends into armed groups or personally suffered at the hands of government security forces.⁹⁷

The prospect of gaining social capital as well as of being part of a disciplined unit that can bring a sense of order and control rather than being simply at the mercy of circumstances beyond one's control constitutes another motivating factor to join armed groups. For instance, more extremist groups including ISIS and al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham have specifically recruited boys into their ranks through free schooling that included armed components such as weapons training.⁹⁸ As the Syrian education system has effectively collapsed and with over 2.1 million children out of school,⁹⁹ education options provided by armed groups are becoming increasingly popular and are often also the only alternative available, besides education from parents.¹⁰⁰

5.4 Women's conflicting agencies and vulnerabilities in the Syrian conflict

By 2013, around 5,000 women were engaged in military combat in Syria.¹⁰¹ The first Syrian Arab female battalions were formed in May 2012, as a direct response to government attacks in Homs. The Daughters of al-Walid Brigade, for instance, announced on YouTube that it was arming and training women in self-defence, as many accounts of rape and sexual violence were spreading at that time.¹⁰² The Mother Aisha battalion provided support for the FSA in 2015–2016 in Old Aleppo, and remained unique in its existence.¹⁰³ It was exclusively comprised of women who provided aid and security to the FSA in addition to being a full military unit. The female combatants not only operated as fighters on the frontline, but were also in charge of two medical field hospitals for injured fighters and a police station for women detainees.¹⁰⁴ A female commander of the battalion who was interviewed saw her main role as reinforcing in male fighters the fact that women are important political agents and ready to carry weapons on the frontlines to defend the territory.¹⁰⁵

95 "Maybe we live and maybe we die": Recruitment and use of children by armed groups in Syria, Human Rights Watch, 22 June 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Z. Brophy, IS "recruits hundreds of child fighters in Syria", Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 24 March 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/3/24/is-recruit-hundreds-of-child-fighters-in-syria/>; Syria: Armed groups send children into battle: Recruitment under the guise of 'education', Human Rights Watch, 22 June 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/22/syria-armed-groups-send-children-battle>; J.G. Horgan, M. Taylor, M. Bloom and C. Winter, From cubs to lions: A six stage model of child socialization into the Islamic State, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 0(0), 2016, pp.1–20

99 Supporting Syria & the Region London Conference, Syria crisis education strategic paper, 2016, http://www.oosci-mena.org/uploads/1/wysiwyg/160128_UNICEF_MENARO_Syria_policy_paper_final.pdf

100 Interview with a Syrian female lawyer and activist, Istanbul, January 2016

101 A. Heffez, Using women to win in Syria, Al-Monitor, 29 September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/women-fighters-syria-rebels-regime.html>

102 The YouTube video was online during the research phase, but by the time of writing it seems to have been deleted. See also: Syria displacement crisis worsens as protracted humanitarian emergency looms, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Press Release, 14 January 2013, <http://www.rescue.org/press-releases/syria-displacement-crisis-worsens-protracted-humanitarian-emergency-looms-15091>

103 Women on the front lines in Syria, CBS News, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/women-on-the-front-lines-against-isis/>

104 Ibid.

105 Interview with a member of the female opposition Mother Aisha battalion, Aleppo, November 2015

However, most fighting roles taken on by women seem to be as snipers in cities where they do not need to mingle too closely with men.¹⁰⁶ In addition, it can be assumed that women also support combat units – and their sons, brothers, fathers, husbands and neighbours who are fighting – by taking up roles often carried out by women associated with armed groups, such as cooking, laundry, nursing, organising supplies or information gathering.

An important distinction must be made between Arab areas of northern Syria and the Kurdish areas, where female fighters are not a rarity. The YPJ wing of the YPG was founded as an autonomous women's army in 2013 and has been fighting armed groups such as ISIS and leading the battle in the northern town of Kobane.¹⁰⁷ Women also serve in the Kurdish police forces, the *Asayiş*.¹⁰⁸ The reason for the existence and social acceptance of female fighters among the Kurdish population goes back to a strong women's movement and a culture of decades-long resistance of Kurdish women as fighters, protesters, prisoners, politicians and leaders of popular uprisings, although this was arguably more the case in Kurdish-majority areas in Iraq and Turkey rather than in Syria. Despite this legacy, Kurdish society cannot be termed 'gender equal' given the prevalence of male-dominated rule and violence.¹⁰⁹

The Syrian government as an armed actor also has female combatants in the ranks of its military, even if the vast majority of those fighting in armed groups supporting the Syrian government and in the Syrian national army are also men. In 2013, the Lionesses for National Defence brigade was formed comprised exclusively of women from the Alawite confession, with the intended purpose to control checkpoints and carry out security checks, for instance on veiled women, in an attempt to free up male soldiers to conduct larger operations.¹¹⁰ This brigade supplements the National Defence Force, a pro-government paramilitary force.

For non-state armed groups, indicative findings point towards women taking on various traditional support roles such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and gathering materials.¹¹¹ This is especially relevant for those fighters living in and operating from their homes, both in urban and rural areas. In addition, it can be assumed that women also support combat units – and their sons, brothers, fathers, husbands and neighbours who are fighting – by taking up these support roles.¹¹²

Generally, Syrian women do not play a major role as armed combatants. In besieged areas, they have instead become a vital supply line crucial to the survival of other civilians. For example, they take risks to help "smuggle medicine or food past checkpoints due to them being able to pass through unchecked by authorities on occasion, although if caught their punishment is severe".¹¹³ Women's agency depends on the situational context and their place or role in the family, as their decision-making power over male members of the family is generally weak, with the exception of older women who may be in positions of family matriarchs. Nonetheless, there are very few women on the frontlines in a support capacity, as men themselves cook and go to field hospitals for treatment.¹¹⁴

Many internally displaced Syrian women have undergone a drastic shift in traditional roles within their families and communities. Women from poorer communities, who were mostly confined to roles within the household, are often the only able adults in the home left to support themselves, their children and elderly persons in their

106 Ibid; CBS News, 2016, Op. cit.

107 F. Bateson, T. Dirx, G. Frerks, D. Middelkoop and N. Tukker, *Gendered alternatives: Exploring women's role in peace and security in the self-administered areas of northern Syria*, Den Haag/Utrecht: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research/Utrecht University, 2016

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid; D. Dirik, *Western fascination with 'badass' Kurdish women*, Al Jazeera English, 29 October 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html>

110 L. Morris, *Assad's Lionesses: The female last line in the battle for Syria*, The Independent, 22 January 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/assads-lionesses-the-female-last-line-in-the-battle-for-syria-8462221.html>

111 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

112 Ibid.

113 Z. Haddad, *How the crisis is altering women's roles in Syria*, The Syria crisis, displacement and protection, Forced Migration Review, September 2014, p.46, <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/syria/haddad.pdf>

114 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

family. The World Health Organization estimates that "10% of the population is living with disability associated with injury", increasing the caretaking pressures on women.¹¹⁵ For women from rural areas who lived on subsistence farming, "displacement into urban areas has left them not only without means for daily survival but in an entirely new context where their skills are not adequate to ensure survival. Women are now involved in new activities and livelihood projects have been in high demand in an attempt to provide an alternative source of income to women using skills they already have."¹¹⁶

The impact of violent conflict on civilians especially in the non-Kurdish areas in the north of Syria has had many negative indirect effects on women, such as forced displacement, the erosion of social capital and the destruction of basic infrastructure, which hinders their social, political and economic participation in a society already suffering from discrimination, patriarchy and gender-based violence.¹¹⁷ Additionally, individual small arms, which have been proliferating since the beginning of the conflict, pose a great threat to women who are usually the most affected by the acquisition of this type of arms. Small arms increase the risk of gender-based violence, especially in an atmosphere saturated with tension and pressures, including, for example, domestic violence or spousal killings.¹¹⁸ Moreover, men are almost always the bearers of guns, which exacerbates the power imbalances between men and women.¹¹⁹ In addition, women are more likely to "face stigma, persecution or marginalisation by their husbands and families in the event of injury or disability".¹²⁰

5.5 Specific vulnerabilities of LGBTI individuals in Syria

There are few reliable reports of LGBTI lives in pre-civil war Syria. Current reports, which contrast a "secular, tolerant" Syria of the pre-war era with the current repression by groups such as ISIS, present a distorted and overly positive view of the past. While the level of direct targeting of LGBTI individuals was not at the level it is at now, they did risk harassment, violence, exploitation, discrimination and repression from official state actors, wider society and family members.¹²¹ There are no accounts of SGM individuals being part of any armed group in Syria and openly stating their gender identity as such, which does not mean that especially, gay or bisexual men have not been forcibly recruited or have joined voluntarily.

In general, the situation of LGBTI individuals is extremely precarious as they risk physical, sexual and psychological violence from all armed groups. There are accounts of men being specifically targeted by Syrian government forces and opposition armed groups based on their sexual orientation, and of them being subjected to violence, discrimination, blackmail and extortion, from armed actors and civilians alike.¹²² The especially violent treatment of men suspected of being gay by ISIS, including allegedly being stoned to death or thrown from high-rise

115 World Health Organization (WHO), Syrian Arab Republic annual report 2014, Cairo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2015, http://www.who.int/hac/crises/syr/sitreps/syria_2014_annual_report.pdf

116 Z. Haddad, 2014, Op. cit.

117 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Violations against women in Syria and the disproportionate impact of the conflict on them, NGO summary report: Universal periodic review of the Syrian Arab Republic, Geneva: WILPF, 2016, p.16, http://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/WILPF_VAW_HC-2016_WEB-ONEPAGE.pdf

118 Ibid.

119 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, The impact of firearms on women, 4 May 2016, <http://wilpf.org/the-impact-of-firearms-on-women>

120 Ibid.

121 Austrian Red Cross/Accord, Syria: Treatment and human rights situation of homosexuals: Legal provisions concerning homosexual activity; social treatment of homosexuals (including the issue of 'honour killings'), Vienna: Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, 2009, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4a16a9d92.html>; and H. Myrntinen, L. Khatat and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

122 G. Reid, The double threat for gay men in Syria, Washington Post, 25 April 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-double-threat-for-gay-men-in-syria/2014/04/25/30117ee2-ca3a-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html

buildings, has caught media attention.¹²³ In addition to this abuse perpetrated by all parties to Syria's conflict, many face family and community rejection, which can range from ostracism to violence and even to death threats.¹²⁴ Several of the respondents from across the gender spectrum reported having been sexually exploited by armed actors and civilians in return for not being 'outed' or for services such as shelter, both in Syria and in displacement in Lebanon.¹²⁵

123 A. Cowburn, Isis has killed at least 25 men in Syria suspected of being gay, group claims, The Independent, 5 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-has-killed-at-least-25-men-in-syria-suspected-of-being-gay-group-claims-a6797636.html>

124 G. Reid, 2014, Op. cit.

125 H. Myrtilinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

6. Gendered refugee realities in Lebanon and Turkey: *"It's like adding salt to the wound"*

Escaping armed conflict does not automatically mean escaping violence – in fact, this research highlights how Syrian refugees of all genders face various forms of discrimination and violence in their host countries, and how these forms are in part determined by gender. While the research focused on the immediate neighbouring countries of Lebanon and Turkey, for many who continue their journey further into Greece and the Balkans and on to Central Europe, or via North Africa to Italy, the perils and threats take new forms as the journey unfolds. What also became evident was that some of the same gender expectations that might lead someone to join an armed group cause others to leave: for example, the expectation placed on men to be breadwinners and protectors might lead some men into joining armed groups, but others to seek to protect their family by bringing them to security abroad and supporting them financially.

6.1 Life in exile: Shifts in gender roles, lack of mobility and realities of discrimination

A very strong component of the gendered refugee experience emerging from the research in Lebanon and Turkey is the prevalence of power hierarchies intertwined with social class, nationality and gender. Making sense of gendered structural inequalities is critical to understanding vulnerabilities faced by Syrian refugees and their possible recruitment to armed groups out of a situation of being refugees. The displacement of Syrians does not happen in a vacuum, as the already distinct political and socio-economic contexts in Lebanon and Turkey shape the gendered refugee experience and are reshaped by it.

The refugee contexts of Lebanon and Turkey present a different reality to the active combat zone of Syria; consequently, the risk of joining armed groups is less evident there. The research findings from Lebanon and Turkey strongly point towards the shift in gender roles as a critical aspect of Syrians' lives in exile. As the patterns of mobility and lifestyles have changed, both women and men, but also girls and boys, are forced to redefine core aspects of their identity, as will be examined in more detail in the following section.¹²⁶

The perceived threats to established masculine and feminine norms and roles in displacement and conflict have exacerbated the stress that men and women are experiencing. The roles men and women are traditionally expected to play not only provide a normative framework to live by, and structure daily activities and way of life, but also provide women and men with a sense of self-worth as they try to fulfil them. For instance, the lack of jobs coupled with a high level of discrimination from host societies and physical insecurity constitute a significant challenge for displaced Syrians. Other research has also pointed to the negative impacts of the loss of social networks for women but also for men, whose mobility is often more restricted due to host country regulations, for example, in Lebanon.¹²⁷

126 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, Op. cit.

127 SREO, 2013, Op. cit.; IRC, Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugee men in Lebanon: Investigating protection gaps, needs and responses relevant to single and working Syrian refugee men in Lebanon, Beirut: IRC, 2016, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/464/irclebanonrefugeemensvulnerabilityassessment.pdf>



Credit: European Union 2016 – European Parliament (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 2.0)

A Syrian man displaced by the conflict stops at an informal shop in Osmaniye refugee camp, Turkey, 2016.

Women refugees have both been able to, but have also been forced to, take on new social roles, “renegotiat[ing] ... [their] collective and individual identities”.¹²⁸ For some, these processes have been something they have been able to embrace, while others have struggled with it, and women’s agency may be undermined by the presence of a controlling husband or male relative, let alone an abusive one. On the other hand, women refugees without male partners or older male household members can find themselves in a position of heightened vulnerability.¹²⁹

Male heads of households who were previously expected to be the breadwinners are often struggling to find economic opportunities that enable them to earn a regular income. Aside from fulfilling their roles as caregivers and taking care of household chores in a context of displacement, many Syrian women have also had to provide financially for their families.¹³⁰ This shift in gender roles can potentially provide women with a sense of empowerment, but also has the concomitant risks of burdening them with additional responsibilities as well as increasing the risk of being subjected to exploitation at work.¹³¹ Many children, and especially young boys, are also working to help provide an income. Refugee boys aged as young as 14 years interviewed in Tripoli who had lived in Lebanon for around two years stated that the conflict had drastically changed their social situation and personal role in the family, placing a lot more ‘adult’ responsibilities on them.

128 SREO, 2013, Op. cit., p.11

129 Ibid, p.4

130 R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, 2013, Op. cit.

131 Ibid.

"We work while men stay inside the camp because they don't have any identification papers and are therefore afraid of going out so they don't get arrested on checkpoints of the Lebanese army. We feel that we are independent and we can raise our voice and say no to any man who treats us with injustice."

– Young Syrian woman, Shwakir camp, Tyre, Lebanon

Living in a legal grey zone in both Lebanon and Turkey has placed additional challenges on Syrian refugees, with many feeling compelled to limit their movements for fear of being arrested, detained or even deported back to Syria.¹³² Male respondents all reported facing mobility and security challenges, and feeling scared of being caught by Lebanese officials.¹³³ This also negatively affected men's possibilities of accessing services and recourse to justice if, for example, they have been cheated out of their wages.¹³⁴

Gendered assumptions of men internalised by governments, service providers and host communities can increase men's vulnerability. Young single men especially tend to be seen by service providers as very low on their priority, due to assumptions of their self-reliance and ability to navigate their life as refugees. Furthermore, they are often implicitly or explicitly seen as a threat.¹³⁵ Men's own expectations to be able to confront problems without relying on outside help, the expectations of being a breadwinner getting in the way of being able to access services such as healthcare, but also unwillingness, for example, to take advice from women nurses also can serve to compound men's vulnerabilities.¹³⁶ In terms of SGBV against men and boys, while there are indicative findings of this occurring, taboos and stigma around reporting and lack of attention on and funding for research on the topic mean that there are little data available to date.

Security challenges coupled with dominant gender norms also affect women's and girls' refugee experiences. The EFM of girls, often to similarly young male relatives or older men, is widespread among Syrian refugee communities.¹³⁷ Among the key justifications is the perception of the protection of women's and girls' 'honour', as harassment is widespread and there are cases of kidnapping and rape.¹³⁸ Syrians' precarious legal situation implies that they cannot access formal justice mechanisms, meaning they are more vulnerable to criminal acts as persecution of the perpetrator is unlikely.

*"We face constant harassment and humiliation. They [Lebanese men] always harass us at the market. They tell us to get in the car with them in return for 5,000 Lebanese pounds [US\$ 3.30]."*¹³⁹ – Young Syrian refugee woman, Shwakir camp, Tyre, Lebanon

Overall, Syrian respondents in Turkey mentioned the threat of physical violence less, emphasising the broader structural challenges including the lack of job and educational opportunities, which is directly tied to issues related to Syrians' legal status. The different language adds another barrier to engaging constructively with the host society. One young Syrian man in Gaziantep mentioned that the gap between Syrians and Turks was a challenge,

132 D. Aranki and O. Kalis, Limited legal status for refugees from Syria in Lebanon, The Syria crisis, displacement and protection, Forced Migration Review, September 2014, p.18, <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/syria/aranki-kalis.pdf>

133 Doing justice to refugees: Legal constraints for Syrians in Lebanon, International Alert, 27 October 2015, <http://international-alert.org/news/doing-justice-to-refugees>; IRC, 2016, Op. cit.

134 IRC, 2016, Op. cit.

135 Ibid; L. Turner, 2016, Op. cit.

136 Research findings from a conflict-sensitivity assessment conducted in primary healthcare centres (PHCs) in Lebanon in 2014 points out that the majority of PHC users were women, including Syrian women, attending to their own healthcare needs or those of their children. Syrian men are reportedly often fraught with issues surrounding documentation and residency, limiting their movement out of informal settlements and through checkpoints. See Integrity Research and Consultancy, Conflict sensitivity institutional capacity assessment: Primary healthcare sector in Lebanon, London: Integrity Research and Consultancy, 2014, <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/conflict-sensitivity-institutional-capacity-assessment-primary-healthcare-sector>

137 D. Spencer, "To protect her honour": Child marriage in emergencies – The fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence, London: Care International UK, 2015, http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf

138 Ibid; interview with a Syrian women's rights activist, Beirut, June 2015

139 Calculated using XE Currency Converter, as of 21 April 2017, <http://www.xe.com>

stating that "the most difficult problem is the language".¹⁴⁰ Moreover, unlike the unofficial status of camps in Lebanon, official refugee camps in Turkey are mostly administered by Turkish authorities. Camp directors have a lot of power, for example, prohibiting marriages with people outside of the camp, prohibiting divorce and keeping family units in camps (instead of singles), simply because it is easier to accommodate them. Movement in and out of the camps, as well as access to these camps by international organisations, is very difficult.

Issues of structural violence are widespread in Turkey and strongly affect Syrian refugee women and girls, who represent the most vulnerable group.¹⁴¹ The legal loopholes make Syrian refugee women and girls vulnerable to physical and sexual exploitation, including by host communities. For instance, there are numerous cases of marriages between Turkish men and young Syrian girls and women.¹⁴² Since polygamy is illegal in Turkey, marriages between Syrian women and girls and already married Turkish men are not officially registered, meaning that the rights of the 'spouse' are neither guaranteed nor recognised, and neither are any of their children's.¹⁴³

Displaced people fleeing from violence face and are subjected to violence not only in their country of origin but also during various phases of the flight and upon arrival in the host country – which may actually not turn out to be a very safe haven.¹⁴⁴ In the context of direct exposure to violent conflict, vulnerability to violence, harassment and discrimination is dependent on one's socio-economic status, the degree of protection one has through social connections and the extent to which one is able to 'pass' as heterosexual as opposed to being 'read' as LGBTI by others, regardless of one's actual SOGI.¹⁴⁵ In addition to physical violence, and/or under threat thereof, "SGM individuals are often sexually violated, exploited, abused and humiliated by conflict actors, but also others who may coerce them under threat of 'outing' them and/or use the prevailing impunity to commit their acts".¹⁴⁶

LGBTI individuals have experienced harassment (including sexual harassment), insults and violence at the hands of Syrian state forces and armed groups, but also by the Lebanese General Security Forces (*Sûreté Générale* – responsible for border and immigration control). Some have had their documents confiscated by Syrian forces, leaving them in legal limbo in Lebanon.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, they have experienced the threat of violence from other family members, community members, armed groups and state security actors, from other refugees and the host community. Exploitation and discrimination was omnipresent – even in presumed 'safe spaces' such as within the SGM community in Beirut, where they may face discrimination for being Syrian and refugees.¹⁴⁸ Lesbian, transgender and women bisexual refugees may be at a higher risk of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse than gay and bisexual men, especially those able to 'pass' as heterosexual.¹⁴⁹

The experiences of LGBTI refugees in Lebanon in part echo some of the broader problems and vulnerabilities faced by Syrian refugees, but are also somewhat exacerbated by their SOGI status. The experiences and challenges are also very different across the whole refugee population, depending on how much of a social network they have in Lebanon (some Syrians have family ties to the country), their social class, clan and religious background. Conditions also vary greatly between those who live dispersed in urban areas (some with and

140 Interview with a young Syrian man, Gaziantep, Turkey, November 2015

141 Centre for Transnational Development and Cooperation (CTDC), Syrian refugees in Turkey: Gender analysis, London: CTDC, 2015, <http://ctdc.org/analysis.pdf>

142 Ibid.

143 Interview with a Turkish academic, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, January 2016

144 U. Krause, A continuum of violence? Linking sexual and gender-based violence during conflict, flight, and encampment, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34(4), 2015, pp.1–19

145 H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

146 H. Myrntinen and M. Daigle, 2017, Op. cit.

147 H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

148 FGDs and interviews with Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi LGBTI refugees, Beirut, 2015; see also H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.; S. Allouche, IR and the instrumentalization of sexuality in the reproduction of political leadership in Lebanon: On being queer, Syrian and refugee in contemporary Lebanon, Paper presented at the International Studies Association 2016 Annual Convention, Atlanta, 16–19 March 2016

149 H. Myrntinen and M. Daigle, 2017, Op. cit.

some without access to affordable housing) and those who live in what are officially termed informal tented settlements (ITSs). In the ITSs, refugees tend to be from similar geographical areas and share a religious/clan background, and social structures as well as gender norms from Syria tend to be replicated to a degree. Thus, it is likely that LGBTI refugees living in urban settings, especially Beirut, have at least potentially more social freedom than those living in ITSs.¹⁵⁰

Many Syrian LGBTI individuals consider their stay in Lebanon to be temporary and aspire to move to perceived LGBTI-friendly countries in Europe and North America. Trans women in particular perceive Lebanon as a 'transit' country, as they face high levels of discrimination and cannot undergo gender transition there.¹⁵¹ While access to international protection for Syrian LGBTI individuals is still limited, awareness about the need for such measures is growing. The realities on the ground are difficult, as many LGBTI individuals reside in Lebanon with their families and "would not disclose their sexual and gender identities to caseworkers, who are mostly Lebanese or Syrian themselves, due to fear of stigmatisation, retribution or of being reported to the authorities".¹⁵² Collaboration between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and national organisations providing protection is increasing, as referral systems are set up and services such as safe houses, legal aid, psychosocial support and drama therapy are provided.¹⁵³

6.2 Levels of discrimination and susceptibility to joining armed groups in exile

The realities of the refugee experiences mean that many Syrians are physically but also mentally distanced from the active conflict in Syria. While the conflict has an immense impact on people's lives, the day-to-day concerns of Syrians, especially those who have now been abroad for a few years, are quite different from the concerns of those still living in Syria. As most of the research findings in Lebanon and Turkey underscore, Syrians' focus is increasingly about how to build their new lives away from the conflict.

The majority of respondents, including all women and girls, strongly rejected violence and took the decision to leave Syria to escape the fighting. A number of explanations provided for leaving Syria are involuntary implication in the fighting. For instance, a 22-year-old male respondent in Ketermaya camp in Shheem, Lebanon, said that, "Syria is better despite it all, but I cannot go back because I will be called for military service and I do not want to be with the regime".¹⁵⁴ The fact that active fighting strongly targets boys and men constitutes a strong male vulnerability that – together with the coping mechanisms to deal with it – is underanalysed.

"It is impossible to stay in Syria because young men are being called to fight in the army or to join one or the other opposition factions. We, as young Syrians, know that Lebanon is only a momentary phase for us." – 16-year-old male Syrian refugee, Beirut, Lebanon

While not always directly stated by respondents as such, the role of family and support networks seems to represent a strong factor for younger and older men not to engage in the armed conflict. Men's responsibilities to financially cater for and ensure the protection of their families led many not to engage in the fighting. One young man from Ketermaya camp stated: "If I didn't have a child and a family, I would have gone back to Syria to fight with the fighters [of the FSA], but I cannot leave my family behind." Having to provide for and support a wife and children is a common explanation given by male respondents in their early 20s and above, to explain their lack of engagement in armed fighting in Syria and the justification for their departure in the first place.

150 H. Myrntinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 Interview with a Syrian man, Shheem, Lebanon, January 2016

Adolescent Syrian boys and young men aged 14–22 who were interviewed in the north of Lebanon all mentioned having left school to work. While the majority of the interviewees confirmed that they still wished to carry weapons in defence of their villages and homes, what is actually stopping them from doing so is their newly emphasised role as breadwinners for their families and the responsibility of ensuring their protection. Due to the deaths of family members, some men "become heads of households and thus need to provide on a regular basis for family members, something they could not necessarily do as actual or potential combatants in Syria".¹⁵⁵

Closeness to family members and especially to mothers seems to reduce young Syrian men's risk of joining armed groups and returning to Syria. The agency of mothers in moving their sons away from fighting also comes across in interviews conducted in Turkey, with one young Syrian man in Gaziantep specifically stating that his mother is the reason "why [I] left the fight and came to Turkey".¹⁵⁶ While research respondents did not mention pressuring their male relatives to fight or cite being pressured into fighting by family members, it cannot be conclusively stated that this did not occur.

"Had I stayed in Syria, I would have been obliged ... to join an armed group to protect myself. When I was in Syria, my mother was always worried about me and on my back everywhere all the time; she arranged for my move to Lebanon." – 22-year-old Syrian refugee man, Ketermaya camp, Shheem, Lebanon

Ultimately, the shifts and partly disruption of family and social relationships both in physical and emotional terms constitute a major stress factor for Syrians in exile. Traditional constellations of families and support networks are interrupted and, as one young female respondent in Akkar said, "it's impossible to find an entire family together".¹⁵⁷ A number of Syrian men and boys in Lebanon and Turkey mentioned the will to join the armed fighting. However, every single one of them showed signs of contradiction, not least through saying that they wish to work and start a family, despite the fact that they have decided to leave the active conflict by seeking refuge in a neighbouring country. A key reason for the wish to return to Syria and join armed groups was the pervasive discrimination that they experienced in their daily lives.

"Someone stubbed out a cigarette in my eye and he is Lebanese. I do not understand why Lebanese hate us even though we pay our rent and do not need anyone." – 14-year-old Syrian male, Tripoli, Lebanon

The omnipresence of violence and discrimination represents a traumatising factor for adolescent boys specifically, who have difficulties adjusting to a lost childhood and none or only very little education prospects. Not surprisingly, adolescent boys conveying feelings of rejection and marginalisation by their host communities expressed the strongest wish of returning to Syria and of 'liberating' their country in order to live there again. However, while they did express the desire to potentially want to join the fighting in Syria, it is more likely that this wish is born out of a fantasy of almightiness.

Moreover, the young Syrian boys and men who were interviewed only referred to themselves and their experiences and did not refer to women's and girls' experiences at all. In contrast, women and girls who were interviewed seemed much more aware of broader social dynamics, referring to negative impacts of the refugee experience on men and boys as well. When discussing preventive measures for young men not to join armed groups, adolescent girls and young women in Akkar mentioned providing economic opportunities, ensuring social cohesion and resolving legal issues that are leading some men to return to Syria and then engage in fighting.

"I have so much fear of the Lebanese army checkpoints. When I am crossing a checkpoint, I read half the Quran before I even reach it just to feel safe and drive fear away." – Young Syrian male respondent, Deddeh, Koura, Lebanon

155 R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, 2014, Op. cit., p.35

156 Interview with a young Syrian man, Gaziantep, Turkey, November 2015

157 Interview with a young Syrian woman, North Lebanon, December 2015

Palestinian refugees from Syria face an even more precarious legal situation, leading many to move to pre-existing Palestinian camps across Lebanon, including the Burj el-Shemali camp near Tyre and the Shatila camp near Beirut. Lebanese authorities have almost no control over the camps, which are effectively governed by Palestinian political factions and face high population density and poor standards of public services, coupled with a high proliferation of arms. While some respondents mentioned feeling in relative safety in the camps, others said that they feel trapped. One Syrian boy in Shatila camp said, "we do not get out of the camp out of fear that Lebanese security forces may arrest us at checkpoints".¹⁵⁸ The precarious security situation in the camps is also mentioned as a security impediment.

"Here in Lebanon, there is no safety. At night, we cannot go out as there are many street gangs, and we are afraid to go out of the camp due to road blocks because we do not have legal identification documents." – Syrian-Palestinian boy, Shatila camp, Lebanon

Exposure to members of armed groups and precarious living conditions may increase the likelihood of recruitment. Those Syrian refugees living in areas directly bordering Syria, such as Arsal in Lebanon, face a higher risk of direct engagement with armed groups. Arsal has been the site for armed clashes between the Lebanese army and Syrian armed groups such as al-Nusra but also ISIS, and was used as a crossing and trans-shipment point for explosive devices.¹⁵⁹ However, exposure to members of armed groups in Palestinian or informal Syrian camps is also common. Living in cities with high political tensions such as Saida and regular armed clashes such as Tripoli potentially puts individuals at a higher risk of joining an armed group.

While armed groups are more visible and accessible in Syria, young men who decide to return to Syria to fight usually do so with encouragement and the help of an intermediary, who facilitates the travel and connections with the right people in Syria.¹⁶⁰ This research suggests that experiences of discrimination in displacement and grievances stemming from these can in some cases have the potential to act as a 'push' factor for joining armed forces, but that other factors would likely need to be in place as well.

During an interview, a 16-year-old Syrian male, originally from Deir al-Zour countryside but living and working in Beirut, emphasised his determination to join al-Nusra back in Syria.¹⁶¹ The factors that influenced him to think of taking such a decision include some of his close family members already being part of armed groups such as the FSA, incitement of violence on social media and, most critically, the bad living conditions in Lebanon including working most hours of the day and being discriminated against by his co-workers and neighbours. In spite of his stated determination, however, he had not in fact gone back and other similar cases were not encountered.

Generally, being outside the country decreases young Syrian men's and adolescent boys' vulnerability of joining an armed group back in Syria. In other words, being displaced seems to reduce the risk of men and boys joining armed groups in Syria. The realities young Syrians in exile are facing, including discrimination and lack of educational and job opportunities, are not drivers of recruitment into armed groups per se, but together with a number of other variables, such as proximity to members of armed groups, violence and a lack of a close support network, their likelihood to join an armed group can potentially increase. The appeal of joining an armed group in Syria while being abroad seems more inspired by an ideology that provides a sense of belonging and purpose. As the individual lives in a different spatial reality, the psychological attachment to the homeland and the importance of an ideology providing a justification for this reasoning seems more important than for those who are in Syria.

158 Interview with a Syrian boy, Shatila camp, Beirut, January 2016

159 ICG, Arsal in the crosshairs: The predicament of a small Lebanese border town, Briefing No. 46, Beirut/Brussels: ICG, 2016, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/lebanon/b046-arsal-in-the-crosshairs-the-predicament-of-a-small-lebanese-border-town.aspx>

160 Interview with Syria expert, Haid Haid, London, March 2016

161 Interview with a Syrian boy, Beirut, January 2016

All respondents from Turkey and Lebanon were well aware and strongly expressed their frustration at the real and perceived injustices of their situation. This shared experience of structural violence and daily discrimination could potentially make them more vulnerable to exploitation or indoctrination of extremist ideologies by armed groups. The research findings indicate that the so-called "lost generation"¹⁶² of Syrian children, who are out of school and face precarious living standards and prospects, might well be more prone to exploitation by individuals, groups and ideologies that would pretend to offer them the opportunities they consider themselves to have lost, as well as the social support network and care that has been disrupted in their lives.

Furthermore, young men are more often than not viewed or perceived as potentially dangerous, and might be open to radicalisation or prone to violence. This, in turn, obfuscates vulnerabilities and has harmful implications for civilian men and their families, as host countries fear that single men crossing their borders are fighters, either entering the host country to rest and see their families, or coming to recruit and organise armed opposition or to bring the fight into the host country.¹⁶³ However, when vulnerability is understood as being created by circumstances, men, women and children can all be vulnerable, albeit in particular ways relating to their gender. Refugee women, girls and LGBTI individuals are made vulnerable by particular conditions and social relations, while refugee men also face vulnerabilities as a result of particular threats and circumstances. These vulnerabilities include being more likely to be sent back to Syria, suffering from particular forms of police harassment and being punished for labour market violations.¹⁶⁴

162 Home, No Lost Generation, <http://nolostgeneration.org/>, accessed 17 January 2016

163 R. Davis, A. Taylor and E. Murphy, 2014, *Op. cit.*, p.37

164 L. Turner, 2016, *Op. cit.*

7. Conclusion

This report has examined some of the main gendered impacts of the violent conflict in Syria, as well as the gendered dynamics of recruitment into armed groups.

Gender norms and expectations strongly influence the susceptibilities to recruitment into armed groups and vulnerabilities on a general level, and affect different men, women and those with other gender identities in different ways. Attempting to make sense of the reasons why someone would join a specific armed group in the conflict in Syria leads to an analysis of different variables that can increase or decrease one's susceptibility to joining an armed group.

A key finding is that gendered expectations and gender norms do not automatically lead to one kind of outcome – rather, the outcomes may even be diametrically opposed. A man seeking to provide economically for his family may decide to join an armed group or may seek to leave the country, either with or without his family, to provide for it through work abroad. Armed groups are successful in recruiting members because they are able to offer their members something they cannot find in civilian life, be it economic opportunities, status, protection, a sense of identity and purpose, a social network, comparative freedom or an escape from oppressive family structures.

Political opposition to the Syrian government seemed to be a motivating factor for all respondents, although this is also due to the sampling of the study – Syrians in government-held territories were not interviewed. Some respondents have engaged in armed groups, while others refused to do so. While political views seem to be a prerequisite for engaging in armed groups on the ground, they do not automatically make someone more vulnerable to joining an armed group. Social expectations of men as protectors of and providers for the family are making men and boys more vulnerable to joining armed groups in Syria. However, the conflict also creates a strong motivation for getting their families and themselves out of it and fleeing to neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Proximity to violence, armed clashes and armed elements constitute a significant vulnerability factor, as those under direct attack might perceive a military response more favourably than those who are in exile and face a different set of daily struggles in their host societies. Influence from peers and family members can increase susceptibility to joining armed groups and receptiveness to more extreme views on social life, and represents a challenge both in Syria and in exile. Ethnic and confessional identity does to some extent influence what group one does or does not join. For instance, while Kurds can and some have joined more leftist battalions in the FSA, a non-Kurdish Syrian man or woman would find it difficult to join the YPG.

While understanding these dynamics is important in order to provide ongoing support to Syrians affected by the war, both in and outside of the country, a deeper understanding of gendered experiences of conflict and displacement will also be necessary for the peacebuilding stage once the war winds down.

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