

Feminist and Women's  
Organisations in Syria:  
Challenges and Opportunities





# **Feminist and Women's Organisations in Syria:**

Challenges and Opportunities

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## About Women Now for Development:

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Women Now for Development (Women Now) is a feminist, women-lead organisation dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in shaping a democratic future of Syria. Established in June 2012, by renowned Syrian author and journalist Samar Yazbek, it is now the largest Syrian women's organisation, reaching thousands of women and girls annually inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, through three integrated programmatic areas: Protection, Empowerment, as well as Participation and Leadership programs. Women Now also works on Research, Advocacy and Campaigning - at the local and international level. Our research and advocacy is primarily focused on feminist knowledge production: documentation and collection of women's experiences and testimonials, in-depth qualitative and quantitative research and analysis, and local and international awareness-raising about women's rights, women-led activist movements, feminist civil society initiatives, gender-based violence and women's living conditions in Syria.

## About IMPACT:

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IMPACT - Civil society research and development e.V. is a civil society organization established in Berlin in 2013 and has offices in Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

Supporting civil society is the core of IMPACT's mission. IMPACT is a catalyst for cooperation and exchange of experiences and ideas between local civil society actors themselves and with their international peers. In addition to that, it offers support to civil society actors and activists with a local-sensitive and holistic approach including assessment, research, training, long-term coaching and financial support. To that end, IMPACT grows and sustains a network of civil society actors, to jointly advocate for democracy, human rights and diversity.

## About Global Fund for Women:

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Global Fund for Women funds grassroots movements and champions responsible and impactful philanthropy. Anchored in feminist principles, we leverage deeply rooted relationships and technical expertise to equip movements with flexible financing and resources to maximize their impact. We educate and engage sector leaders including donors, policymakers, and the media to create favorable conditions for movements to thrive. And, we document and share learnings to strengthen activist efforts globally. By providing more to movements, we are shifting power towards women, girls, and all marginalized people worldwide.

## Executive Summary

This paper, commissioned by the Global Fund for Women, offers an overview of common challenges and opportunities for collaboration and effective partnership among feminist and women's organizations (FWOs) in Syria. Overall, 92 individuals participated in consultations, providing data on the work of 76 different organizations and groups in major regions across Syria and in Gaziantep, Turkey. The Majority of FWOs in Syria emerged after the 2011 revolution which provided a space for organic and grassroots organising and triggered a move towards wider civic engagement. They are largely motivated by solidarity with their fellow women and by their awareness of gender inequality.

In-country FWOs' spaces are constantly contested and closely monitored by political and military authorities. FWOs have highlighted particular challenges in obtaining legal recognition from local authorities or having any form of umbrella protection. Direct threats to safety and security are also common forms of power exercised over women activists. Security concerns have caused many organizations to work undercover and stop documenting their work. This results in women's work going, yet again, undocumented and invisible. Other challenges include the existing societal gendered attitudes and relations which are also reflected in the structure of civil society organizations; FWOs' internal dynamics are characterised by the following main divides: pro/anti-regime; secular/religious-Islamic; ethnic Arab/Kurd; the geographical and social divide; and the generational gap. Furthermore, some general factors that influence the spaces available for FWOs are those related to freedom of movement and control over resources.

Most of the spaces available for FWOs remain highly influenced and reliant in pursuing their agenda on the support of national and international organizations and parties. For that reason, running a sustainable and self-sufficient organisation is very difficult to achieve by most FWOs. Reliance on funding is inherent to civil society in Syria due to dire needs, inflation and scarcity of

resources. Moreover, while funding is crucial, it can also include disadvantages such as the NGOisation of feminist and women's collectives, pre-set agendas, the nature of the funding and unattainable criteria. Hence, the relationship between FWOs and their donors is an unequal one. International actors have great influence over local actors, leaving local actors with less agency to provide their insight or in implementing their preferred method of collective action. Another common challenge to both feminist work and the coordination towards feminist and women's movement building is co-option by organizations that are neither feminist nor women-led.

Despite challenges, women have created and claimed their own spaces, changing gender stereotypes and gaining the recognition they deserve for their vital roles in society. They have introduced and maintained feminist knowledge production as well as continuing their role in service provision and attending to a variety of needs in society today. Where women's spaces are contested by security apparatus, FWOs come together to support one another and set an example of feminist solidarity. All participating FWOs agreed with the urgency of developing practical steps for effective collaboration and movement building. For example, in-country FWOs identify the coordination between FWOs as a simultaneous priority, challenge and opportunity.

So far, the networking method used by local organizations has been reliant on informal personal relations rather than structural organisational connections. There is hope for wider unification however, as it remains in the FWOs' interests to bridge gaps and embrace difference as a strength. Overall, four major issues were identified as priorities by the FWOs. These include: change in legislation regarding gender sensitivity and effectiveness; change of social norms and attitudes - from both women and men - regarding gender equality and women's rights; economic empowerment and financial independence; and gender knowledge production.

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

**FWOs:** Feminist and Women's organizations

**GFW:** Global Fund for Women

**INGOs:** International Non-Governmental organizations

**NES:** North and East Syria

**AANES:** Autonomous Administration of North East Syria

**ISIS:** Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

**UN:** United Nations

**HTS:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

**CSOs:** Civil Society organizations

**SGBV:** Sexual and Gender Based Violence

# Introduction

Women and feminist activism in Syria dates back to the late 19th century, and has undergone multiple developments and challenges. More recently, the 2011 revolution led to another wave of women and feminist activism tackling different issues from active political participation to humanitarian support. In doing so, they have been highlighting the multilayered problems facing women in Syrian society today as well as offering solutions on how best to tackle them.

Today, Syrian women and Feminist and Women's organizations (FWOs) continue to tackle injustice on various fronts. This predominantly includes providing humanitarian support for Syrian refugees and displaced peoples, establishing organizations that provide services promoting peace, documenting human rights violations, and supporting a gender-sensitive perspective to conflict resolution.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the analysis of the Feminist and Women's Movements in Syria. The focus of its contribution is how FWOs can strategize common goals, mobilise collective actions, and identify how communication tools could support this endeavour. **Such information is obtained from consultations with different FWOs with in-depth dialogue between such groups enabled by the facilitation of safe spaces for discussion.** That being said, we are aware that FWOs are only part of the wider movements. This report acknowledges that there are activists in Syria from all walks of life and in no way intends to monopolise the discussion around women's rights.

Reports show evidence of the transformative impact that grassroots feminists and women have had in Syria.<sup>1</sup> There is also indication that, had FWOs attained adequate tools and resources, their efforts to procure sustainable peace and democracy would have been achieved much earlier in the conflict. A feminist approach to transitional justice and peace-making is thus essential to the creation of a fairer and more equal society. In this sense, by enabling FWOs access to adequate support, and applying a gendered lens to negotiation and justice processes, significant benefits are made to the struggle for a more peaceful, democratic and equitable Syria.<sup>2</sup>

That being said, this report argues that such support for FWOs should be considered within the context of collaboration between FWOs and collective action, as opposed to just individual organizations. Certainly, given the turbulent context of Syria, it is more imperative than ever that FWOs collaborate with one another to advance common goals. In order to actualise such collaboration, serious efforts are required to develop dialogue and civic engagement as a movement rather than individual organizations. Since 2011, several meetings have been held (attended by both feminist and non-feminist women activists) to develop collaboration between organizations, address internal and external challenges, and identify common grounds for collective actions. Underpinning these endeavours is an attempt to understand the diverse experiences, viewpoints and knowledge of Syrian women. Indeed, the diversity of the meetings' members and discussions has generated great drive, ideas, and action. In other words, this report intends to describe the Syrian FWO's scene through the lens of its participants and offers perspective on how to best support them.

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1 - Kapur, B. (2017) Participation of Syrian Women in Political Processes 2012-2016 Literature Review. Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation./  
Khalf, R., Ramadan, O., Stolleis, F. (2014) Activism in Difficult times – civil society groups in Syria 2011-2014. Badael Foundation and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Al  
abdeh M. (2017) Lessons from Syria on women's empowerment during conflict. Open democracy <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/lessons-from-syria-on-womens-empowerment-during-conflict/>

2 - Women Now for Development, "Gender Justice and feminist Knowledge production in Syria" 2019/ available at <https://women-now.org/gender-justice-and-feminist-knowledge-production-in-syria/> The Syria Campaign and Peace Direct (2018) Idlib Lives- The Untold Story of Heros [Online] Available at: <https://www.idliblives.org/> retrieved April 5, 2020/ Ghazzawi, R., Mohammad, A., Ramadan, O. (2015) Peacebuilding Defines our Future: A Study of Women's Peace Activism in Syria. Istanbul: Badael Foundation.

## Part One:

# Researching Feminist and Women's Organisations in Syria

## 1. Definition, Methodology and Scope of the Study

This paper seeks to generate an in-depth understanding of the common challenges and opportunities for collaboration and effective partnership among feminist and women's organizations (FWOs) in Syria. It was initially commissioned by the Global Fund for Women and then developed by Women Now and Impact. This understanding is obtained through the analysis of eleven workshops with FWOs, community-based initiatives, and individual activists operating in Syria, including 92 individuals representing 76 different organizations and groups. Feminist activists who were not members of FWOs but were still active in Syrian civil society were welcomed to take part as FWOs-Ally.

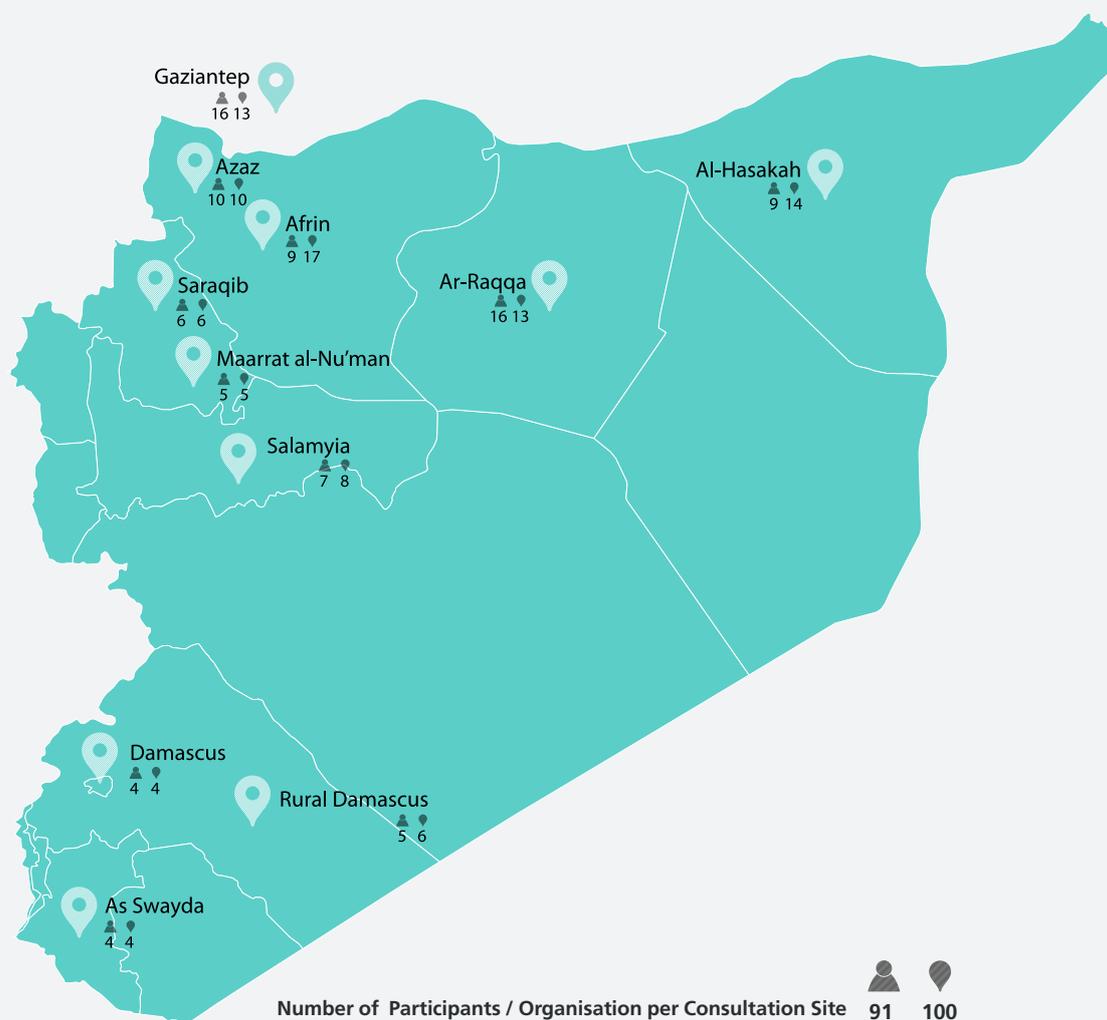
**Women's Rights Organizations:** Women-led organizations advocating women's rights and/or offering services with women as the main participants and beneficiaries. These organizations do not necessarily endorse feminism or address power relations within their organisation or practices.

**Feminist Women's Rights Organizations:** Women-led organizations working for equality between sexes by conducting in-depth gender analyses of structural discrimination induced by imbalanced power relations. With critical thinking and self-reflection as key features of their work, these groups address power relations within their organisation and practices.

**FWOs-Ally:** Feminists and Women's rights activists working in Civil society organizations that are largely led and run by men, with the majority of their work not necessarily focused on women's rights. These organizations mainly target the general public and other civil society organizations.

(these are our definitions and they are meant to serve the purpose of this research and facilitate understanding the reference of titles)

Overall, 92 individuals participated in consultations, providing data on the work of 76 different organizations and groups. Consultations took place as full-day workshops in major regions across Syria and in Gaziantep, Turkey. The regions in Syria include Damascus, rural Damascus, As-Swaida, Salamyia, Afrin, al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah (with representation from Qamishli), rural Aleppo, and Idlib. The consultations made in Gaziantep were for strategic reasons (in cases where members of Syrian-based organizations were only accessible in Gaziantep and when the operations of certain organizations were well-supported in Gaziantep).



Participants were selected from a variety of locations to ensure the inclusion of different identities across political lines and religious stances, proximity to violence, class, age, race, ethnicity and regions. Race in this context refers, as Cynthia Cockburn (2007:7) points out, to “the outcome of social processes of differentiation, hierarchisation, and disempowerment not only on the basis of skin colour and phenotype, but also on territorial association, culture, religion, community, and national identification.”<sup>3</sup>

The intersection of these identities, alongside the organizations’ area of work and date of establishment, formed a criteria for selecting the participants and sometimes location of the consultations. An intention was made to provide a platform for newly emerging grassroots initiatives and activists - which is less needed by the more experienced organizations. Moreover, consultation was also sought with self-identified Muslim women’s organizations, to explore different ways of being inclusive.

3 - Cockburn, C. (2007) From Where We Stand: War, Women’s Activism and Feminist Analysis. Zen Books: London- New York.

The consultations comprised of semi-structured and open-ended questions, inviting participants to reflect on and discuss issues relating to: their priorities and methodology of activism within the current geopolitical context; internal dynamics of the feminist and women’s movement; limitations, challenges and opportunities for cross-border and cross-national solidarity (linking locally-based groups, diaspora and refugees communities, and international feminist organizations); and views and efforts related to reconstruction processes. Both a transcription and a general report were produced at the end of each workshop/interview and analysed.

## 2. Analysis Framework

The analysis framework used in this study is the “PowerCube”, a multi-dimensional and intersectional tool used to reveal and examine power and how it manifests in governance, organizations, and social relationships. The “PowerCube” tool, developed by John Gaventa in 2002, is depicted in a model, the shape of a Rubik’s Cube. The model has three dimensions of power: ‘**spaces**,’ ‘**levels**,’ and ‘**forms**’. Each dimension is divided into at least three interlinked sections (See Figure II).

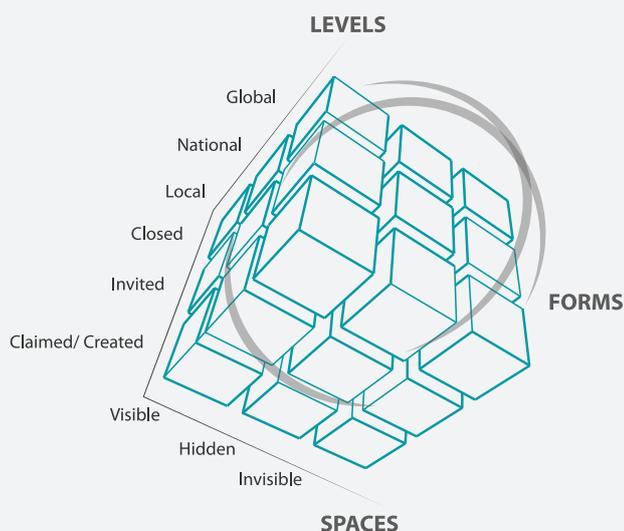


Figure II: The PowerCube Framework

In this study, the PowerCube is key in informing the cross-analysis of areas of opportunity for feminist engagement, particularly in light of their ever-changing conflict-related circumstances. At the same time, it highlights the resources accessible to grassroots feminists and women, the challenges that jeopardize their spaces, and their coping mechanisms. The PowerCube provides an in-depth analysis of the women’s viewpoints and experiences, and how these can influence the structural power imbalances (such as physical and digital security, and access to and control over resources) in the communities where they live. The PowerCube also offers a multi-dimensional and intersectional evaluation of the sorts of spaces in which local groups are active, the strategies they use, and how they interact in light of donors’ interests. This enables the analysis to cover both organizations and individuals - exploring their positionality of power and how they take part in and contribute to the power equation.

In order to illustrate how the “PowerCube” is utilised in the analysis of our study, an overview of three dimensions of power (‘**Spaces**,’ ‘**Levels**,’ and ‘**Forms**’) is presented below:

## 1) Spaces of power:

Spaces of power refer to possible arenas - of involvement and action - in which power takes place. These spaces could be political, physical or virtual, democratic or non-democratic. Spaces of power are generally divided into three categories:

- Closed - This involves closed meetings where decisions are made in the absence of participation or witness from those ultimately affected by them. Opening up such spaces for broader consultations and participation would require preconditions of public involvement, transparency and accountability.
- Invited - This involves the participation of individuals in public arenas - exclusive to invitation and set regulations and boundaries. Women are invited either by national or local, or governmental and/or non-governmental organizations for either a continuous process or one-time consultation.
- Claimed/Created - This involves establishing a space of mobilisation around identities and/or shared goals. These spaces are created by less powerful people, often growing from resistance, where Claimed/Created spaces are used to shape an agenda.

Here, it is worth noting that spaces of power are not static but dynamic. For instance, a closed space could open, and an invited space could close through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-option, and transformation. Equally, there are many ways to look at how formal and informal spaces of power are created, and with whose interests and what terms of engagement. Understanding these questions is crucial and enables our understanding of how power relations “shape the boundaries of participatory spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter, with which identities, discourses and interests” (Gaventa, 2005: 11).

## 2) Levels of power:

Levels of power include four categories denoting how and by whom the spaces for participation are shaped:

- *Global* - Formal and informal sites of decision-making beyond the nation-state.
- *National* - Forms and structures of authority which exist within and are usually connected to the nation-state. Examples include governmental institutions, political parties and coalitions.
- *Local* - Sub-national governments, councils, and associations based locally.
- *Household* - The micro-level, that may be outside of the public sphere, but which helps to shape what occurs within it.

## 3) Forms of power:

Forms of power refers to the manifestation and extent of visibility of power, identified by Gaventa (2005), as follows:

- *Visible*: The participation and domination of individuals in observable decision-making.
- *Hidden*: The particular voices and opinions that are kept away from public attention, not appearing in agendas and/or decision-making processes.
- *Invisible*: The power operating on a psychological level, shaping one's sense of self and inferiority/superiority. Such an invisible form of power is also a tool by which inequalities and exclusions are considered the norm and made to appear acceptable.

In this study, we not only examine the power conflicts between different actors and over critical issues, but also the quality of participation. This involves analysing gender (in)sensitivity across the three dimensions of power. The approach used throughout the analysis is based on elements from the reconstruction of the PowerCube by Janet McIntyre and Mervin Gascon's (2018) - with consideration given to the power proximity to gender sensitivity with gender-aware and gender 'blinking'.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the multi-dimensional representation of the cube - which exhibits complex connections between multiple actors in dynamic power relationships - this study will focus on analysing the interactions between the three dimensions of power as suggested by Gaventa (2019: 2). To support such an analysis, this study further incorporates 'Expressions of Power'. This provides an additional lens to the PowerCube framework, that assists in bringing agency, structure, and actions across the three power dimensions.

#### 4) 'Expressions of Power' will be analysed based on the following categories:

- *Power over* - The ability to affect the actions and thoughts of others.
- *Power to* - The capacity to act, exercise agency and realise the potential of rights.
- *Power within* - The sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is the precondition for action.
- *Power with* - The synergy that can emerge through partnership and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building.

Figure V: PowerCube and Expressions of Power – External (in relation to external actors: combating patriarchy)

	PowerCube		Expressions of Power				Strategies & Actions	Desired Transformation	Facilitation & Learning
			over	to	with	within			
Context Analysis	Forms	Visible							
		Hidden							
		Invisible							
	Spaces (formal/ informal)	Closed							
		Invited							
		Claimed							
	Levels	Household							
		Local							
		National							
		Global							

4 - The more commonly used term is 'gender blind' but we've opted for the term 'gender blinking' to avoid ableist connotations.

### 3. Limitations

#### Research Scope and methods:

Initially, the research plan aimed to include both FWOs inside Syria and abroad, only to realise soon after that this was not only unfeasible within the allocated time frame but also unfair to either experience. The consultations inside Syria proved very rich and required from us focus and further consideration. That being said, we consider FWOs outside Syria to be vital components of the Syrian feminist and women's movement and we plan to explore their experiences and views to develop this analysis and build on other efforts in the field at the earliest opportunity.

Some of the questions, which were intended for a collective exercise, were ineffectual in eliciting a collective response. Instead, the exercise served as an individual Q&A. This may highlight difficulty in thinking collectively and presents a major barrier to movement building. For future studies, it is recommended that the functions and means of fulfilling the methodology are taken into further account. To effectively facilitate participants' thoughts to stream in a collective manner is of great assistance in focusing on the research purpose and minimising diversion.

#### Analysis framework:

The analysis framework does not explain why the spaces, forms and levels of power exist the way they do. Nonetheless, it is useful as it provides a detailed account of the spaces, forms and levels of powers exerted upon and exercised by the FWOs. Indeed, the focus of this paper is not only on whether there is space or not, but what types of space are available and how they make power dynamics more visible. Further still the analysis framework assists in finding appropriate responses and interventions.

#### Accessibility and the security situation:

Firstly, our awareness, and therefore inclusion, of all feminist and women's initiatives was greatly limited. This is partly due to the absence of a reliable and exhaustive national database. Instead, we relied on IMPACT's existing database of 514 organizations in Syria and neighbouring countries - further developing it at any opportunity during the data-collection phase. Secondly, security issues jeopardised our access to some of the organizations and initiatives known to us. Thirdly, limitations in timeline meant we could only reach those who were available and ready at the time to take part in the consultations.

Considering such limitations in representation, all participating organizations, initiatives and individuals, are a significant sample of vital components in Syria's feminist and women's movement. Women's Now for Development and IMPACT consider this paper an important step forward, and acknowledge that further research is needed to develop greater understanding of each of the sections and to explore new aspects not covered in this research.

#### 4. Reflection on the contributors' role in this research

All members of the team involved in this research are part of the Syrian feminist and women's movement. As a result, we have similar ambitions for the movement in Syria, an invaluable resource in accessing various initiatives, and the ability to write about the current state of feminist organizations from a grassroots perspective. That said, our varied viewpoints and lived experiences undoubtedly influence the interpretation process of the research data.

We tried as much as possible to ground our analysis on the view of participants but have sometimes felt the need to complement it with our own observations as organisations working in the field. When that is the case, it will be mentioned explicitly.

#### 5. Consent and Verification

Informed consent was acquired, with all participants understanding the purpose and outcome of their consultations. Anonymity was favoured by most participants, due to concerns relating to safety and security. As a result, any quotes refer to organizations' initials and geographic location where the consultancy took place, when possible.

As for verification, we were generally able to verify the independence of FWOs but in some cases the links to local authorities and/or their ideological affiliations were unclear.

**The information is presented as it was provided by participants and does not necessarily reflect the views of the organizations behind this research.**

## Part Two:

### Power Dynamics Within and of Feminist and Women's organizations

Part two provides an overview on various characteristics of Syrian FWOs. This includes outlining their areas of work and the challenges they face in their struggle for gender equality in Syria. Indeed, despite remaining steadfast, the actions and strategies devised by FWOs depend greatly on their context and work circumstances. This should be considered given the mass humanitarian crisis imposed by the conflict, as well as the impact on women rights threatening FWOs' existence and values, as well as human rights more broadly. The analysis presents the major issues raised by participants.

#### 1. Spaces of Power

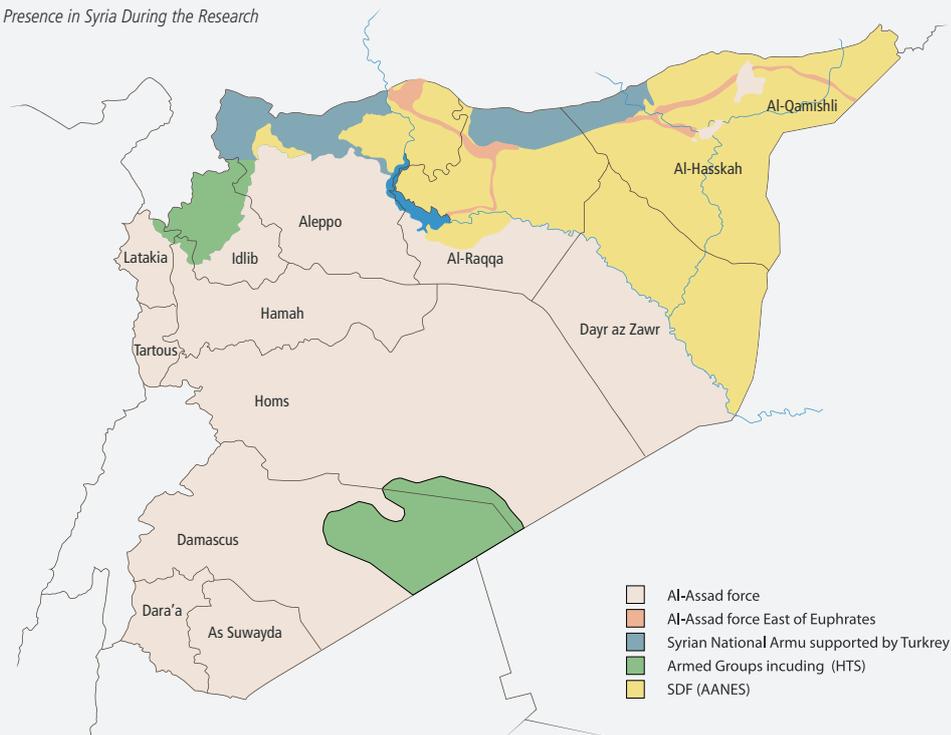
Spaces of power refer to possible arenas - of involvement and action - in which power takes place. These spaces could be political, physical or virtual, democratic or non-democratic. Spaces of power are generally divided into three categories:

##### A. Closed, Contested, and Closely Monitored Spaces:

Closed - This involves closed meetings where decisions are made in the absence of participation or witness from those ultimately affected by them. Opening up such spaces for broader consultations and participation would require preconditions of public involvement, transparency and accountability.

##### i. Political and Military Authorities:

Political and Military Authorities Presence in Syria During the Research



In-country FWOs highlighted particular challenges in obtaining legal recognition from local authorities or having any form of umbrella protection.

- Assad Regime:

In areas held by the Assad regime, FWOs face great constraints and limitations involving a lack of law and regulation to protect civil society organizations. Moreover, all FWOs and other civil organizations are monitored by security forces. Some participants mentioned examples of the unclear and oppressing criteria of accepting or rejecting the registration of civil organizations by the regime. For example, one participant in Damascus mentioned the withdrawal of approval for the registration of two feminist secular organizations in 2005, whilst pro-regime Islamic women's groups - such as Qubaisyat - have faced no problem with registering or developing since 2007.

**Another participant in (Suwayda) said:**

“The biggest challenge is security, especially when talking about (advocacy) campaigns; women's rights and support for their participation in politics and unions and institutions [...] the organizations faced security harassment.”

Constraints were also made evident in the organising of consultations for this paper. Fewer organizations from Damascus (3-4 times less than in Idlib) responded, or were able to attend, due to security concerns. Further still, previous knowledge of and trust in the consultation moderator were vital and undoubtedly a prerequisite in ensuring participation. This reflects the oppression faced by activists at the hand of the regime in the areas under its control, itself part of the wider repression that triggered the 2011 revolution. Generally speaking, there is no freedom of assembly in these areas.

- Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES)

In northern areas controlled by the autonomous Administration of North east Syria (AANES), some FWOs and, more generally, CSOs struggle to obtain registration, as the registration process is complicated and highly controlled by the authorities. All registration requests are managed by the NGO affairs office in the Syria Democratic Council. However, FWOs are referred in many cases to the women's office in the council to notify the office of women-related activity or to obtain a specific MoU. (For some time, FWOs needed to go to the women's office. However, this has changed and the whole process is now controlled by the NGO office). It's been also reported that the authorities imposed the presence of affiliated members to monitor the activities held by CSOs (including FWOs).

The process of registration keeps changing and is affected also by the security situation. For instance, registration processes were halted for a period of time following the Turkish incursion in NES in October 2019, which poses an extra challenge for newly established organizations. As one participant from Raqqa said: “Civil society work is generally welcomed so long as it is limited to service provision, it is met with enormous difficulties when it involves political participation and leadership”

In order for unregistered FWOs to undertake activities, as one respondent pointed out, they have to operate under the name of another organisation that is legally approved to avoid interruption and prosecution.

- *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Syrian Salvation Government:*

In Idlib, de-facto governed by the Syrian Salvation Government established by HTS, work on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) or women's empowerment is risky. FWOs, or CSOs in general, refused to recognise the government which was trying to impose a registration process including through threats. At the same time, these FWOs are not supported by most donors due to the funding restrictions around potential links with terrorism-listed organizations such as HTS. Furthermore, HTS routinely cracks down on activists in Idlib and has generally banned groups from activities they perceive as threatening.

This oppression is usually combined with resistance and FWOs, while concealing their activities for security reasons, have maintained their subversive work.<sup>5</sup> Thus, despite these challenges, FWOs in Idlib maintain a significant presence.

That being said,, the Assad regime and Russian bombardments of Idlib have significantly worsened the humanitarian situation. By the time the consultation was done, nearly one million Syrians were forcibly displaced, including participants, and some FWOs have been forced to stop operating.

- *Turkish-controlled Northern Syria:*

Opposition-held areas that are under de-facto Turkish control in northern Syria are managed by a web of local councils affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government in Gaziantep, Turkey and the Turkish government maintains significant control. In addition to being registered in Turkey, organizations working in this area, including FWOs, need to have additional permissions in order to be allowed to operate. In some cases, a special work permit is also required from the local council's NGO affairs office.

CSOs might also need to notify specific offices in the local council, such as the family and social affairs office, about activities for coordination purposes. It was however reported that FWOs and women-related activities are generally easier to obtain permits for than basic services that might be seen as contradicting the local councils' work (such as education or health).

- *Turkey:*

In Turkey, where many Syrian FWOs are based to be able to work on northern Syria, some remain unregistered as they fail to meet certain difficult-to-attain requirements. This obstructs potential collaborations with other organizations. FWOs are also pushed to either work in secrecy or work around the system in order to obtain registration without affecting women's access to resources. Syrians can't work without an annually renewed work permit, which is usually very difficult if not impossible to obtain. The ever-changing legal landscape makes it difficult for some FWOs to operate effectively and be sustainable, thus putting themselves at risk<sup>6</sup>.

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5 - The context of which Syrian CSOs operate are complex and constantly changing, for more information on the major developments taken place in the past few years, please refer to: Ahmad, J. (2019) Changing Contexts and Trends in Syrian Civil Society – A report based on the mapping of Syrian Civil Society organizations. Berlin: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development.

6 - Rola Asad, Attempting to Organize a Syrian Feminist Movement: War, Exile, and Intergenerational Tensions; Kohl Magazine (2020) <https://kohljournal.press/attempting-organize>

**Overall, it is clear that FWOs need to deal with multiple authorities, some more authoritarian than others. These authorities impose certain restrictions, especially when it comes to their own violations. The different rules and regulations can make it difficult for FWOs operating in various areas to communicate or work with one another, including to stand in solidarity with one another. Creating safe spaces, both physically and mentally, under these conditions has proven to be very difficult.**

## **ii. Society and Gender-based Social Contract:**

Despite the spaces created for women to challenge the societal restrictions, many Syrian women continue to live in highly patriarchal communities that limit their participation in decision making or access to equal opportunities and resources. This is achieved by placing restrictions on their movement and spaces. As a result, FWOs agree that changes to law and legislation must be accompanied with societal change. For example, in places where pro-women's rights legislation does exist (such as in AANES), such societal enforcement has proved challenging, as one participant in al-Hassaka argued:

“Traditions and social norms prevail in society and stand as a barrier against the reinforcement of certain laws, such as the law prohibiting early marriage.”

Such social norms are further reflected in the structure of civil society organizations that are mostly led by men who are not necessarily qualified or competent to occupy leadership positions. Furthermore, as one feminist-ally organisation in Afrin suggested, the hierarchies in such organizations pose a significant challenge to effective collaborations - especially when the management team are responsible for decision making and yet lack interest and/or good communication skills. The representative of another organisation further explained how the gender dimension made things more difficult as they prevent women from reaching decision-making spaces. She described her discrimination faced during a job application when she was told by the manager that her “pregnancy prevents her doing the job”. One FWO-ally contended that gender bias and discrimination continue to prevail due to legal shortcomings and a lack of measures to regulate civil society and ensure the mainstreaming of gender equality on all levels.

In regard to available market space, whilst the contexts and gender dynamics have their specificities, and are different in different geographical areas, all were shown to be highly gendered. One of the self-identified Islamic women's organizations shared a case of an unsuccessful project relating to economic empowerment. Whilst the project aimed at generating income for women workers in food preservation, the fact that the organisation was composed only of women proved more of a hindrance. This was because that market is largely dominated by men who thus have more authority.

One organisation in Raqqa recognised the gendered market spaces whilst also highlighting the greater acceptance of some communities toward sex-mixed environments and spaces. In such communities, It highlights the great opportunity for FWOs to invest in spaces such as women's education and work. Unjust societal norms and practices, although negatively impacting the space women and FWOs enjoy, are key factors to the foundation and drive of FWOs. FWOs emerged as a response to inherent structural gender biases and unjust social practices, since worsened by the conflict. In other words, where women are treated as second class citizens and human beings, grassroot organizing and mobilisation become a necessity and a key, if not only, way to social change.

### iii. Feminist and Women's Internally contested Spaces:

Closed and contested spaces are also a product of the internal dynamics within and among the FWOs. As highlighted in the consultations, FWOs in Syria appear to have entered a confusing period of struggle to form a movement. Limited space, knowledge and tools are major contributing factors in delaying such formation. Further still is the prevalence of internal division within feminist and women's groups.

Within these struggles, there lay various socio-political stances and approaches. The division is in no way straightforward but rather multiple and complex, taking various forms. Among the most contested groups are pro/anti-regime; secular/religious-Islamic; ethnic Arab/Kurd; the geographical and social divide (in-country/abroad urban/rural etc); and the generational gap. Unable to navigate differences, for reasons that will become clear, some FWOs seem to fall into a trap of creating exclusive spaces. The division appears in particular when approaching sensitive or controversial issues such as sexual and reproductive health, or the right to national self-determination (such as the case of the Kurdish question).

Tensions between FWOs seem to be caused by the inflexibility of some groups towards the definition of feminism, aspects of gender equality and the solutions proposed to advance it. This is most visible between some secular and some more conservative FWOs. Whilst some secular FWOs consider religion a source of women's subordination, religious Muslim FWOs believe that women's subordination comes from a mix of cultural traditions and misinterpretation of religion. For religious Muslim FWOs, religious doctrine is essential to their identity. Therefore, to see other feminists working to take this right away (the right to freedom of beliefs and religious practice) can lead them to distance themselves from feminism.

Another point of contention is the perception by some that feminist demands are elitist and disengaged. Indeed, some participants from different areas expressed their discontent with the work of some existing women's organizations for not addressing women's actual needs on the ground. The groups were, in their eyes, too "distant from the women they are meant to serve".<sup>7</sup> For example, one organisation from al-Hassaka noted the disparities in the following way:

"The target is almost always educated women whereas uneducated and rural women [are] neglected and marginalised".

In attempting to create inclusive spaces in FWOs, there are significant internal challenges. For example, for some civil society organizations gender equality and sensitivity are new concepts, and there have not been enough spaces to discuss these matters.

At the same time, not all women identify as feminists and the Arabic word *Nasawia* (نسوية) is used interchangeably by respondents to refer to feminism and 'women related', with only a few participants making a clear distinction between the two.

Other internal obstacles surround forms of expression, methods of activism and 'controversial topics' including

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7 - F.G. - Raqqa

polygamy, gender identities and sexual orientation issues. Overall, this highlights significant obstacles to the creation of inclusive spaces; and without such spaces there is risk of fragmentation between FWOs that is detrimental to developing feminist alternatives to the status quo.

Some participants acknowledge such disagreement between FWOs, and how this obstructs the cooperation needed for strong mobilisation within a movement. Others, however, consider such disagreements to be normal and expected among organizations with different focuses. For example, one organisation in Azaz argue that their focus on women's political participation does not intersect with relief organizations and that this "has nothing to do with competition nor coordination, just a different focus". Another respondent agrees with that statement, adding that these are "differences in the sense of diversity not conflict".<sup>8</sup>

Some participants offer solutions, as this participant in Azaz does:

"Certainly, priorities differ between organizations, but we can still work on the priorities in a way that ensures outcomes are complementing one another. We can work on increasing networking among each other and meetings to learn about what we do and build on that."

The proposed solution by some is to accept the differences among women and feminists as healthy and normal, and in fact open up spaces for such differences, creating a space for open discussion and debate among different feminisms and women's movements. To facilitate such a space successfully would strengthen and reinforce the legitimacy of feminist discourse in Syria. Overall, we would recommend opening a topic of discussion between various FWOs over whether these differences are obstacles or not, as well as their implications on political participation. We can open up the question as to whether this separation between women's political participation and other aspects of women's lives (such as access to humanitarian aid) by some FWOs - in other words, depoliticization - limits understanding of meaningful political participation and reform.

#### **iv. General: International Borders and Type of Funding:**

Some general factors that influence the spaces available for FWOs are those related to freedom of movement and control over resources. Those are clearly seen on two levels: among different regions in Syria, and between in-country and out-of-Syria FWOs. Although it is out of the scope of this research to study the relationship between those FWOs inside and outside Syria, we believe it is important to conduct further research detailing it. For example, FWOs in some regions have expressed feeling like they have more political space and better transnational networks than FWOs in other regions. Restriction of movement between regions and across borders is one major issue highlighted by some FWOs in different areas.

With regards to funding, project-based funding leaves no space for FWOs to discuss values or reach an agreement on basic concepts and principles. More issues relating to funding are discussed under the section: Hidden Forms of Power.

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8 - W.S.C- Azaz

## **B. Invited Spaces:**

*Invited - This involves the participation of individuals in public arenas - exclusive to invitation and set regulations and boundaries. Women are invited either by national or local, or governmental and/or non-governmental organizations for either a continuous process or one-time consultation.*

A number of the women and organizations who participated in this research (especially, but not exclusively, those in Damascus) were invited to be civil society members of the UN-facilitated Constitutional Committee founded in September 2019. Here, women comprised roughly 30% of the civil society representatives.<sup>9</sup> The focus was to work on advocacy and pressure campaigns in collaboration with the Constitutional Committee. One organisation affiliated with the opposition Syrian Interim Government (SIG)'s Stabilisation Committee has also claimed to be working since 2015 with women from local councils and other public institutions in northern and eastern rural Aleppo to include them in the political process.

Despite such windows into the political arena, however, the spaces women are invited to remain limited and limiting, with significant challenges still facing women's involvement in political processes. In addition to the fact that adequate representation and effective influence on political agenda(s) is still under question, the general sentiment among women activists regarding political participation is that they're being used as tokens.

Certainly, women's input is limited and undervalued as they are repeatedly forced to the sidelines in politics and peace talks. The refusal of political institutions from all sides to support FWOs further hampers their involvement at different levels of peace-making.

## **C. Claimed Spaces:**

*Claimed/Created - This involves establishing a space of mobilisation around identities and/or shared goals. These spaces are created by less powerful people, often growing from resistance, where Claimed/Created spaces are used to shape an agenda.*

The Majority of FWOs in Syria emerged after the 2011 uprising, as the revolution provided a space for organic and grassroots organising and triggered a move towards wider civic engagement. Since then, FWOs have been responding to the mass humanitarian needs on the ground as well as participating on all levels of Syrian life, from campaigning for human rights to taking part in political processes. They are largely motivated by a solidarity with their fellow women, and by their awareness of gender inequality. As a result, some women have created their own claimed spaces, changing gender stereotypes and gaining more recognition for their vital roles in society.

In areas with an established legal authority the few registered FWOs are working on legislation and legal frameworks. Although these are very different contexts, in Damascus (regime-controlled) and al-Hasaka (North East, AANES-controlled), FWOs are working to advance laws prohibiting early marriage, polygamy and women's right to pass the nationality. That being said, it is unclear how much change is possible under an authoritarian regime such as the one in Damascus. As for other areas such as Idlib, FWOs are not able to work on these issues due to their

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9 - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052051>

living in an active war situation and thus having no established clear legal authorities to turn to in the first place.

Some FWOs have collaborated to make use of political and legislative spaces to confront issues relating to women. For example, two organizations in AANES mentioned working together to tackle honour crimes against women by issuing a law case against the perpetrators at the AANES courts and following up on the case development.

Some FWOs are also concerned with widening spaces and building internal capacities and specialisations. As one FWO in Raqqa argues:

“We are working on building women’s capacity as we do not currently have feminist organizations specialised in gender and gender discrimination. We also do not have the commitment of organisations in their bylaws and internal policies or in the recruitment processes to gender-sensitivity, despite the existence of women with high qualifications.”

Some organisations focused on women’s traditional roles and division of labour as an entry point towards women’s empowerment and emancipation beyond its economic value as well as to claim a space that can ensure psychosocial support circles.

In areas that are less stable, such as those under bombardment, FWOs focus on service provision. Unregistered FWOs focus on knowledge production and supra-structure, while registered FWOs have better space to conduct activities. Coordination of collective and complementary actions and strategies may be challenging but could prove fruitful, given the resources available for different FWOs. Despite all challenges, there are women in the public sphere doing great work which is an opportunity for participation and pressuring society to eventually accept their presence.

**Finally, it was mentioned that there has been an emergence of youth-oriented FWOs’ claimed spaces specifically open for young people’s initiatives. This should be welcomed, as they often involve using collaborative approaches and having a hopeful enthusiasm.**

## 2. Forms of Power

*Forms of power refers to the manifestation and extent of visibility of power, identified by Gaventa (2005), as follows:*

- *Visible:* The participation and domination of individuals in observable decision-making.
- *Hidden:* The particular voices and opinions that are kept away from public attention, not appearing in agendas and/or decision-making processes.
- *Invisible:* The power operating on a psychological level, shaping one’s sense of self and inferiority/superiority. Such an invisible form of power is also a tool by which inequalities and exclusions are considered the norm and made to appear acceptable.

### A. Visible:

*Visible: The participation and domination of individuals in observable decision-making.*

## **i. Working as Women and the backlash:**

- *Direct threats to women's safety and security:*

Firstly, participants claimed that direct threats to safety and security is a common form of power exercised over women activists. One organisation highlighted the experience of having many women members receive threats because they wanted to host a conference in a certain area. In a resourceful response, the women held the conference online to ensure the safety and security of all. The gendered nature of such threats against women is a living reality for many, and a major contributing factor slowing down the movement's development. Many women active in the public sphere, be that physical or virtual, are likely to experience verbal and sexual abuse or even detention. This often generates fear of stigma and harm amongst other women, leading them to remain distant from any public work.

Secondly, security concerns have also caused some organizations to stop documenting their work. This results in women's work going, yet again, undocumented and invisible. Further still, security concerns have prevented some FWOs in Damascus from using social media as a platform to communicate and network with other organizations by fear of detention or other types of threats. Thus, many FWOs end up preferring to work behind the scenes and as individual organizations to minimise the risk and avoid being exposed.

- *Gendered attitudes and relations that affect their presence and participation:*

Overall, the societal attitudes and norms regarding women's place in society continually undermine efforts to advocate empowerment. Many women are discouraged from joining FWO programmes and prevented from advocating for their own rights. Gender-related social attitudes and relations affect the social and political spaces available for both active and recipient women.

### **One FWO in Azaz gave the following example:**

*"Society sometimes causes troubles and does not agree with adolescent girls' empowerment. Some local councils are not interested in women's empowerment and would rather focus on basic service provision activities, going so far as to prevent empowerment activities in the first place. Other local councils, however, were excited about and supportive of our work."*

Overall, in most areas, there are neither gender-sensitive legislations nor institutional policies to regulate political and civil society processes and protect women and the space of FWOs. According to participants, this results in the work for women's rights and gender equality depending on the personal understanding of local authorities (religious, social or political), which can differ from one town or village to another.

Gender bias also influences women's representation and participation within different institutions due to the influence it has on the recruitment process, equal pay and promotion. For example, a respondent in Raqqa spoke of the discrimination targeting married and pregnant women, pointing out the tendency for many civil society organizations to end job contracts of those who get pregnant or give birth.

## ii. Working as Women-Resistance:

- *Knowledge production: oral history and marginalised narratives*

Some FWOs emphasised that there is space and acceptance today for certain concepts and thoughts relating to feminism and women's issues. In light of this, media frameworks and forms of knowledge production offer an opportunity to create and promote such feminist and women-centred knowledge production. Indeed, the reporting of women's stories, articles and personal narratives achieves this by enabling the publication of personal accounts into the public sphere.

### **As one organisation in Damascus stated:**

"We're just feminists who believe that the bet on social awareness is a very long process [...] It's difficult for us to do activities [due to not being registered]; therefore, we seek to deconstruct the legal system and the legal situation of women by producing knowledge".

According to some participants, the knowledge production of some FWOs is limited to a few basic feminist concepts and approaches – mainly belonging to second wave feminism. These views reflect elitist anti-religion, secular feminist viewpoints and ways of expressions, which tend to exclude those who identify as committed Muslims, Islamic feminists or those with non-binary gender identities.

Very few, if any, contextual research, statistics or studies of gender perspective are available to support FWOs' work. The lack of gender analysis of the political, socio-cultural, militant, economic and environmental context in different locations pushes aside women's experiences and contributions and prevents FWOs from adequate response to women's needs. Even when information is available, women activists have limited exposure due to the fact that most gender studies production is not available in Arabic.

However, some knowledge production practices could be characterised as a trend rather than something that should be comprehensive and multifaceted (cross-cut sectors). For example, the focus would be on a topic that is of interest to donors such as SGBV, whilst other important issues would not be discussed or examined.

That said, some FWOs agreed that knowledge production is integral to the work of FWOs and women's historiography. As one participant said:

"The studies shouldn't only describe, document, or monitor the current situation but they should also be analytical and comparative."

The suggestion, by many respondents, was that aspects of knowledge production can be improved by bridging the following gaps: lack of analytical approach; lack of comparative knowledge with other contexts around the world; terminology and the language issue (concepts are limited to academia and only those who have access benefit from it); and weak circulation of knowledge and expertise the gap gets wider with foreign language skills: those who speak European languages and those who don't.

### iii Coordination and collective work: a priority, a challenge and an opportunity

All participating FWOs agreed with the urgency of developing practical steps for effective collaboration and movement building. Indeed, at least six of the FWOs have already taken initiative to do this. Suggestions were also made to enhance such cooperative initiatives between FWOs in and out of the country. One organisation proposed that a semi-annual or annual report be written, documenting the work of organizations in Syria. In recognising the need for cooperation, participating organizations acknowledged the need for a comprehensive plan of complementing programmes. That said, another participant also raised the issue of long-term effectiveness of such endeavours in the absence of an umbrella institution. Such an institution would enable representation and mobilisation of women surrounding common identities or goals.

#### **One participant from Azaz shared this view:**

“We aim to become an assembly to all women’s groups. Our motive is that we want to be organised. We embrace diversity on the organisation and management level and the target group level.”

Some organizations in Saraqib, however, highlighted how attempts to work collectively can pose its own challenges. This was argued by one participant who experienced an unsuccessful attempt to exchange services with another organisation. They came to believe that coordination through building a referral system is better than building common programs.

In addition, the issue of favouritism (Wasta, واسطة), personal relations and corruption in decision-making processes was also highlighted by some participants. One participant argued that the competition amongst FWOs is a significant challenge to overcome. Another suggested that “we need to coordinate and network between different centers and organizations, and build bridges for communication amongst each other, instead of having active individuals working separately and for their own center only”. It is about “sharing experiences and thoughts [knowledge]”. In line with this, one FWO asserted that “despite some challenges with coordination, working with other groups helped reach a wider audience”.

Overall, in-country FWOs identify the coordination between FWOs as simultaneously a priority, a challenge and an opportunity. The following section addresses the major challenges facing all in-country FWOs which jeopardises their existence, renders their efforts unsustainable, and stands in the way of actual movement building and collective action. Although, it is worth mentioning that such challenges are also what inspire FWOs to persevere.

So far, the method of networking among local organizations has been reliant on informal personal relations rather than structural organisational connections, although some do connect through data shared with the donors.

#### **One participant in Damascus observed:**

“Networking with other organizations and initiatives concerns everyone because [Syrian] feminist social work became widespread after 2011, but has since somehow turned into more charity-oriented work led by donors’ priorities. We do not rely on the lasting presence of international organizations and their projects and programmes. On the other hand, individuals would be at risk of facing challenges on their

own. Therefore, we need to identify those who are interested in our books and studies and their reasoning behind their interest. We are ready, but it remains up to the other parties to decide how related they feel to our focus.”

Suggestions included organising group discussion sessions and meetings (6-8 people max) and collective action towards one goal. Such meetings and workshops can result in the founding of new women’s collectives. One organisation in Azaz said that this is already happening:

“Soon there will be a networking meeting among a number of organizations to plan 2020 activities, we can work collectively to reach sites and places we haven’t worked in before and to create a wider social awareness.”

## **B. Hidden:**

*Hidden: The particular voices and opinions that are kept away from public attention, not appearing in agendas and/or decision-making processes.*

### **i. International Funding Actors**

Unfortunately, running a sustainable and self-sufficient organisation is still out of reach for all feminist and women’s organizations. Instead, there is a reliance on funding, which is inherent to civil society in Syria - due to the context of dire needs, inflation and scarcity of resources. Funding involves significant advantages and disadvantages, with the funders holding great influence over the feminist and women’s movement, including the nature, timing and methods of its collective actions. Outlined below are the main funding-related challenges raised by the participating organizations. For each issue highlighted there are also opportunities for feasible strategic actions to be taken by international donors and funding institutions, to strengthen the feminist and women’s movement in Syria.

- *The NGO-isation of Feminist and Women’s Collectives:*<sup>10</sup>

Many feminist and women’s collectives are not registered, nor do they (or their staff members) own a bank account - some of the essential criteria required to receive funds. Whilst the need for such organisational and structural work may be reasonable, for many small feminist and women’s collectives the process of attaining funds is inaccessible. Further still, meeting the criteria needed to receive funds often consumes great energy and diverts FWOs from their main struggles and focus.

In this sense, NGOisation is viewed as an attempt to strip the women’s movement of its core values and goals by creating structures that are unable to accommodate the complexities of a given context. In summary, the

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10 - For further information on the NGOisation of FWOs, please refer to: Ali, Z. (2019) Gender Justice and Feminist Knowledge Production in Syria. Paris: Women Now for Development.

feminist and women's movement is forced to attend to bureaucratic structures rather than its values and goals. Furthermore, the process makes it easier for certain people to hold greater dominance over available spaces and resources which creates hierarchies within the movement. This is mostly visible with the access to opportunities and participation in conferences, peace talks and training workshops. There also exists, however, a certain level of institutional corruption and the vicious cycle of 'pre-ready-models-based programming' which leads employees and volunteers who are interested to lack ownership and eventually lose interest in investing in the organisation.

- *Pre-set Agendas, and Funding Nature and Criteria:*

Pre-set agendas, imposed by donors, pose a real challenge. This is illustrated by a respondent who describes some of the agendas put forward by international actors as not appropriately adapted to the socio-cultural context or the needs on the ground. Indeed, local FWOs express their frustration with this challenge, as this example given by a participant in Damascus makes clear:

"Having donors from the UN who aren't local or familiar with this region and coming with pre-made plans that didn't change or adjust in ways that suit each and every region. Syria's needs, for example, are different than the needs in Africa."

A second challenge relates to inflexible funding. This includes not having enough funds to cover administrative costs (core fund), costs unrelated to the projects, and/or costs relating to gender-sensitive HR policies, such as health insurance, social security benefits and maternity leaves. As one participant in Gaziantep noted: "We do not know how to pay the office's next month rent [...] we're losing staff as we are unable to pay salaries or even reimburse the transportation expenses." The latter is particularly relevant due to both financial and security concerns expressed by women participants.

A third challenge is that small, irregular and unsustainable funds affect the effectiveness of projects and jeopardize the 'do no harm' approach - especially considering the protection aspect of the women's empowerment programmes. Short-sighted implementation plans with no tools to sustain or maintain human resources or to improve the situation should be addressed. One participant in Azaz explains:

"Funding is provided as drops - very small - if given. We aspire to sustainability. The training workshops are done over three months but we compress them due to fear of the end of the fund. We have the right to feel safe, to receive funds and to have enough time. Not having that limit our plans and capacities."

A fourth challenge is that donors tend not to support or work with religious organizations, unless they have a religious agenda themselves. For example, one respondent was refused support because their centre is part of a mosque or Dar al-Ifta (Fatwa House). That being said, in cases where both donors and organizations have a religious agenda, partnerships can be built and funds provided. Of course, this depends on the context: For example, whilst in Gaziantep this is the case, such constraints don't exist in Antakya. In short, some Muslim women's organizations expressed frustration that they are left limited to the support of religious funding, and wish they had access to other type of support. The same goes for the other way around, with religious funding going almost exclusively to religious organizations.

A fifth challenge relates to a general defect within funding organizations regarding funds and criteria. As mentioned by one organisation in Afrin, unclear funding criteria result in inaccurate project plans, leading them to fail serving many cases. Another organisation in Damascus agrees, claiming the problem to be both the design and the mechanism with which to communicate and share ideas with the right party/donor organisation.

“We shouldn’t only work on monitoring but FWOs have to offer a new approach and work not only to network but also to build as well.”

Another point raised is how funds from donors can be influenced by the depoliticisation (reducing of agency) of organizations and be a precondition to providing funds. As stated by the same organisation in Damascus:

“International actors want staff and not people with cause and agency.”

Finally, finding a common ground among local-local actors and local-intl. actors, and pursuing coordination with the aim of building on each other’s work is highly important. Indeed, a circular model of partnership may facilitate a process of mutual learning and mutual aid.

- *Coordination*

According to participants, a significant challenge posed by international funding actors is their ineffective coordination on a local level. Certainly, as respondents stated, INGOs often refuse collaboration with non-registered organizations - reducing engagement with local actors. Further still, respondents also claimed that UN agencies do not allow more than one local organisation to work in the same area. Whilst this may be an attempt to organise the local civil society efforts, in order to cover as many areas as possible, it could also have the detrimental effect of isolating local organizations whilst centralising the power of international actors.

Another challenge to coordination is the example of maldistribution of funds, where INGOs provide small grants to different organizations with similar projects, sometimes in the same areas/sites. This involves a lack of coordination between INGOs themselves and/or between FWOs and can even create competition.

Overall, the relationship between FWOs and their donors is unequal. International actors have great influence over local actors, leaving local actors with less agency to provide their insight or implementation of any preferred method of collective action.<sup>11</sup>

## **ii. The Co-Option of Feminist Agenda and Women’s rights**

As mentioned, FWOs are working in an incredibly turbulent context that greatly affects their decision making and

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11 - Al-Zoua’bi, Z. (2017) Syrian Civil Society Organizations Reality and Challenge- A research based on the results of capacity assessment of Syrian civil society organizations. Berlin: Citizens for Syria (CFS).

action as organizations. Factors that FWOs must contend with include their proximity to the battlefield, mass displacement and/or siege, the nature of authority control, and access to resources. In light of such strain on access to resources, security and stability, almost all participating FWOs have been focused on responding to the political, military and humanitarian matters on the ground and thus postponing their own development of long-term strategies.

It is perhaps unsurprising that some parts of civil society would ride the wave of women's rights and feminism to meet certain funding criteria. An evidence of that is the marked discrepancy between the number of women's empowerment programmes and the very low representation of women in Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs).<sup>12</sup> FWOs have highlighted this as a common challenge to their work and the coordination towards feminist and women's movement building. A respondent in Gaziantep said:

"Some organizations have women in their structure, or claim partnerships with women's initiatives, because the donors demand that gender balance is preconditional to fund. Both that kind of women's representation and presence and partnerships with such organizations are usually empty and ineffective."

According to participants, there are some organizations that offer their relief services on the condition that women participate in awareness-raising sessions. In these cases, they argue that women are unable to pursue work opportunities as they have to spend some of their time attending these sessions.

Finally, the respondent of an Islamic women's organisation highlighted how another organisation with an Islamic agenda in Antakya, Turkey had ceased support of women's beneficiaries who attended events organised by other organizations, or whose dress code did not meet the standards of that organisation.

### **C. Invisible:**

*Invisible: The power operating on a psychological level, shaping one's sense of self and inferiority/superiority. Such an invisible form of power is also a tool by which inequalities and exclusions are considered the norm and made to appear acceptable.*

### **i. Resilience and Solidarity:**

Considering the past nine years of violence (against civilians, infrastructure, and civil society activists and groups) FWOs are currently exhausted of financial means and human resources. They remain stuck in a cycle of trying to cope and survive. As highlighted, they nonetheless persist in their endeavours to revive proactive agency and build effective tools to enable sustainable change. In other words, they persevere.

Perseverance is a significant characteristic that shone across all respondents. For many women, they must persevere as they have nowhere else to go and would be vulnerable to the consequences of any social collapse or disruption to social cohesion if they did not do so. Many persevere by focusing on work with children, as a way of

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12 - *ibid.*

looking ahead and strive for a better future society. Perseverance also explains why some organizations would go an extra mile to reach other women, as one participant in Azaz noted:

“We go to women beneficiaries instead in case circumstances prevent them from coming to our centres. It does not matter whether we go to them or they come to us, the point is to listen to them and think together about their problems.”

A significant challenge to perseverance relates to the security situation. FWOs from various regions said that expulsion and warfare would cause disruption to their work, at least temporarily. As another participant in Azaz noted:

“In some areas there are explosions. The explosion occurs in one day, and so it delays our work for one day. It is therefore a matter of delay, and not permanent stop of work.”

A second threat to women’s perseverance is cyber bullying and harassment. Although many women have claimed to have experienced this, it is not preventing them from remaining dedicated to their cause and struggle.

Empowerment (through knowledge, skills, and tools sharing) and partnership for collective actions

In the face of such challenges, the participation of empowered women in public life or political processes provides a positive role model for younger women and girls, inspiring and leaving space for hope in a more equal and just Syria. Other matters to celebrate include the recent increase in feminist and women’s initiatives and small supportive circles, which are both encouraging and crucial in providing internal guidance and support among FWOs.

Further still, strength is obtained from being women-led organizations working on women’s issues. As one participant in Azaz said, despite facing major problems in their FWO, “our resources are in our own energy and the volunteering spirit”. Indeed, when funding is unavailable, such spirit is seen with local feminist and women’s collectives as they use their own capacity to strengthen their staff and implement projects that don’t need funding. Moreover, some FWOs have created a solid base of empowered women who utilise their skills and knowledge to change the dynamics of gender participation and representation in their communities. As one participant articulated:

“We collaborate with women’s committees in those areas (areas of operation) and not just as beneficiaries (women who took our training). They have become our partners. In 2019, the initiatives were based on their suggestions and with our support through consultations and logistical and legal support.”

Where women’s spaces are contested by security apparatus, FWOs come together to support one another and set an example of feminist solidarity. An example of this solidarity was in Maraa Al Noman when one organisation lost its fund, it was able to use another organisation’s centers for its activities. This sharing of resources allowed both organisations to continue their activities, expanding the reach of their services to benefit more women. This example is one of many. Despite the continual struggle for effective and systematic widespread coordination, this should not undermine the evident solidarity efforts already expressed on a smaller level.

## ii. Diversity and Exclusions:

There is no intersectional feminist movement that fully includes all positionalities, is fully united around common principles, or is aware of the various levels to structural discrimination. Indeed, women's viewpoints and socio-political stances differ and are as numerous as there are women. Nevertheless, hope remains in viewing difference as strength. Participating FWOs were shown to take remarkable efforts to ensure diverse representation. Many participants demonstrated the potential for such unification by highlighting initiatives, often run by volunteers, that embrace such a worldview.

Overall, participants believe that there is great diversity in the memberships of FWOs. This is considered by feminists within such organizations as a deliberate act of inclusion and natural reflection of society. Yet, despite general enthusiasm to inclusivity, women's initiatives are not immune to unconscious bias. The question of what qualifies a diverse collective, therefore, is a question regarding depth in understanding of the spectrum of marginalisation and privileges within a conflict context. Such an exercise is pivotal in addressing the unconscious bias within feminist and women's groups.

As for exclusion, they can extend to FWOs being subject to stereotyping and false accusations from others, including other FWOs. Indeed, some FWOs supporting the revolution are suspicious of FWOs working in regime-controlled areas and believe them to be supporting the Assad regime, whilst some FWOs under regime controlled areas would accuse the rest of getting fund from INGOs and foreign governments, and therefore of complying to 'foreign agendas'.

## 3. Levels of Power:

Levels of power include four categories denoting how and by whom the spaces for participation are shaped:

- *Global - Formal and informal sites of decision-making beyond the nation-state.*
- *National - Forms and structures of authority which exist within and are usually connected to the nation-state. Examples include governmental institutions, political parties and coalitions.*
- *Local - Sub-national governments, councils, and associations based locally.*
- *Household - The micro-level, that may be outside of the public sphere, but which helps to shape what occurs within it.*

### **i. Global Level:**

*Global - Formal and informal sites of decision-making beyond the nation-state.*

Syrian women participate across a spectrum of political and peace processes. There is, however, concern for a lack of connection to international actors and/or access to platforms at international levels. In this study, only a few reported having such connections.

One example is the Syrian Women Political Movement (SWPM) that was formed in order to build such a connection and works solely on women's meaningful political participation, aiming for at least 30% political participation. The SWPM's campaigns are meant for international as well as national actors, producing policy papers on constitutions, return and reconstructions.

Another informal way to work that some participants mentioned is to join advocacy efforts to bring the issues of forced disappearance to the international community such as is the case with Families for Freedom.

### **ii. National Level:**

*National - Forms and structures of authority which exist within and are usually connected to the nation-state. Examples include governmental institutions, political parties and coalitions.*

On a national level, FWOs are playing a crucial role attending to a variety of needs in Syrian society today, with all FWOs, on some level, raising awareness or providing a service relating to women's rights and issues. Overall, this includes working on protection, awareness raising (legal aspects, health, social harmful practices, and deradicalization), capacity building, economic empowerment, advocacy, relief and aid, knowledge production, disabilities, IDPs integration, peace-building and psychosocial support.

The FWOs' chosen area of interest was shown to be influenced by various factors, including the reality on the ground, the group's proximity to governmental entities, the security considerations, the financial and human resources, and access more broadly. In Damascus and al-Hassaka FWOs focused on knowledge production and advocacy for legislative change, adopted by the government in place. In areas with sensitive diversity, such as Suwayda and Raqqa, FWOs worked more on social cohesion and peace-building among locals and displaced communities. Many organizations also focused on economic empowerment by providing income-generating opportunities to ensure women's financial independence. Other FWOs concentrated on traditional vocational opportunities or integrating computer skills.

Many FWOs also run programmes advocating women's leadership and participation in political entities, alongside working to integrate gender-sensitive perspectives in policy-making. Such change is intended to address the gender bias in the state's legislations (including personal status law), and change discriminatory laws related to inheritance, women's right to pass nationality (especially in case of children resulted from marriage to foreign fighters) and child marriage. Furthermore, they aim to activate the empowering and protective laws that already exist (like those issued by the AANES).

Other concerns addressed by FWOs include gender-sensitive employment recruitment processes, standards and policies. As one women's organisation highlights, women's rights include opposing discrimination against women who wear the Niqab.

Whilst all FWOs agreed with these priorities, each region has its own context and therefore specific needs and levels of severity. For example, in Raqqa, there are enormous challenges, having been under the rule of ISIS, not only on the level of mass atrocities and traumas, including sexual violence, but also in terms of mindsets, as traces of that ideology can still be felt. Here, FWOs have been on the frontlines working, to quote one participant in Al-Hasakeh, "to reduce the level of violence and extremism demonstrated by ISIS-affiliated women in Al Hol camp" as well as providing support to survivors of SGBV.

In these areas, FWOs have worked on women's and girls' rights including: campaigning for girls' education, leading to the opening a high school class which was the only one of a kind in ISIS-controlled regions in Syria and Iraq; fighting stigma and discrimination against female former detainees; and the adolescents' project contributed to creating shared sessions and making social change in terms of society's acceptance of sex-mixed spaces. Some have even planned house visits to raise awareness about violence, child marriage, and the various problems experienced by local, displaced and refugee women. The outcomes of those visits were shared with local authorities. In Sweida, FWOs face different challenges. They have been responding to the tension between local and displaced communities as some locals view the displaced communities as responsible for the killings of their residents in areas where the IDPs are originally from. Thus, FWOs there have been working to facilitate peaceful integration of the new communities, organising meetings to strengthen relationships and ensure effective integration.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that most FWOs agreed that a nation-wide, united women's movement is needed more than ever in Syria. This was acknowledged as an appreciation of how far the women's movement in Syria had come in order for such discussions of women's rights and issues to take place so openly.

### **iii. Local and household levels:**

*Local - Sub-national governments, councils, and associations based locally.*

*Household - The micro-level, that may be outside of the public sphere, but which helps to shape what occurs within it.*

Before the revolution and conflict, most Syrian women carried out traditional roles in public and private spheres. During the conflict, some women became more involved in new roles and responsibilities. Some women decided to be more active in the public space, while others were and are forced to take on new tasks due to the consequences of the conflict, notably the economic situation.

It is within this context that many FWOs focus on matters of economic empowerment and financial independence. Certainly, this is a way of enabling women to enhance their skills, gain exposure and experience, and formulate views of their own. This is why some FWOs argue that economic programmes must also be combined with the provision of tools relating to decision-making, self-care and psychosocial support as well as presence and representation in the media. These programs are welcomed by many FWOs as one participant in Azaz noted:

“Despite all challenges, the society is responding well. We find women in small cities, where we direct our support, interested and willing to participate in these activities. For example, our centre in Qabaseen witnessed a huge turnout and demands for something even bigger. We had also received requests from other cities to start centres.”

Finally, as part of challenging traditional gender norms, some FWOs have stressed the importance of working with men on gender equality, both as gender and supporters for women’s rights.

**Overall, four major issues were identified as priorities by the FWOs concerning these levels of power: change in legislation regarding gender sensitivity and effectiveness; change of social norms and attitudes - from both women and men - regarding gender equality and women’s rights; economic empowerment and financial independence for women and feminists; and gender knowledge production.**

## Conclusion and Recommendations

FWOs remain the primary advocate for women's rights in Syria. The participating FWOs vary in size and structure, ranging from small voluntary teams to larger organizations with established structures. Most of the participating organizations are based within Syria, although some have their headquarters outside whilst still operating within the country.

FWOs face various challenges to their work and existence. These include: the security situation (direct threats to physical and mental safety in a war setting) including forced displacement; discriminatory legislations and gender-‘blinkering’ policies within organizations; patriarchal structures and social norms that champion the subordination of women; the scarcity of financial and technical resources; and the internal dynamics within the FWOs due to poor communication and lack of trust.

In spite of these challenges, FWOs demonstrate great strength and resilience in the work they do, much of which is voluntary. The majority of this work is currently centred on responding to ramifications of the humanitarian crisis in ways that focus on supporting the most vulnerable women and members of other social groups in Syria.

FWOs take remarkable efforts to ensure diverse representation within their organisation. This is an act of peace-building that strengthens social cohesion and enhances the sense of agency and belonging to a community. As previously mentioned, there is no perfect intersectional feminist movement that would include all positionalities, be united around common principles, or be aware of the various levels to structural discrimination. Indeed, women's viewpoints and socio-political stances differ greatly. Nonetheless, there is hope for unification, as it remains in the FWOs' interests to bridge gaps and embrace difference as a strength. Many participants demonstrated the potential for such unification by highlighting initiatives, often run by volunteers, that express such interest and embody a sisterhood.

In this section, recommendations are drawn from the findings of this paper, addressed to the international actors and transnational feminist organizations that have been engaged in supporting civil society and FWOs in Syria.

### Financial and Technical Support:

1. Funding plans that are strategic, flexible, needs assessments-based and involve power mapping.
2. Processes related to programmes design, planning and implementation on a participatory level, involving grassroots feminists and women as the experts of their individual and community needs.
3. Core and strategic funding to ensure financial security and enable scope to strategies beyond project-based activism.
4. Inclusive, context-sensitive funding criteria.
5. Verification for the eligibility of funding beyond the conditions set by political and armed institutions and to consider, otherwise, limitations for FWOs to access the platforms and resources available in their local context.
6. That donors understand the specific needs of FWOs. The type of support most generally needed today is technical and organizational (despite dire needs on the grounds, relief projects are not the priority of in-country FWOs). This includes support to enhance strategic planning and movement building, advocacy, mobilisation, dialogue and trust building with funding parties and among FWOs in Syria.

### Knowledge Production:

1. Investment in gender research and current contextual studies in areas of concern raised by FWOs where gender issues are at the centre of knowledge production.
2. Increase in research and assessments on each of the points raised in this paper.
3. Enabling FWOs' access to local and international experiences and advice in their own language (Arabic/Kurdish or other).
4. Making terminology and language more accessible
5. Increasing ways of circulating and providing knowledge and expertise.
6. Developing channels to enable the exchange of knowledge and expertise between FWOs - to strengthen their work and enable FWOs to collaboratively build on lessons learnt.
7. Supporting space for non-results-based meetings, for women and feminists to discuss their differences and socio-political viewpoints. To encourage positive internal dynamics and collaboration within the women's movement
8. All mentioned points should be available in local languages

### Unifying Discourse:

In order to build and expand the feminist and women's movement in Syria, it is essential to have a unifying inclusive discourse that all can relate and identify with. FWOs needs to discuss and clarify the basics of feminist concepts and open up spaces for discussions to negotiate priorities and navigate different socio-political stances.

1. An inclusive discourse should include participation of all of society's members, including rural and displaced communities, those of lower socio-economic status and educational background as well as other marginalised groups.

2. A culture of acceptance should be fostered, diminishing the categorical divides of 'the other' and 'us/they' in binary opposition - to integrate different feminist approaches and strengthen connection among feminist and women's collectives.
3. Attempts should be made to reshape the narrative in public knowledge and discourse - to combat gender stereotypes and bias in the narrative around women's experiences and roles in society. This involves engagement with media on a local, regional and international level.

### **Communication, trust and Accountability:**

1. Develop effective, secure systems that facilitate communication between different FWOs in Syria or abroad and including between differing groups (such as religious and secular FWOs).
2. Create safe spaces (developed on trust) for FWOs to meet and
  - (a) engage in in-depth discussions on sensitive and controversial topics
  - (b) reflect and discuss their values
  - (c) build relationships that are based on redistribution of power
  - (d) develop a common vision and finally
  - (e) develop an intersectional narrative that acknowledges women's agency regardless of identity politics.
3. Create platforms that help map existing and emerging feminist and women's initiatives and collectives and documents their work. This would serve as a reference to local, transnational and international actors.
4. Promote complementary rather than competitive work to enhance the relationship of FWOs to the wider movement

### **Strategic efforts for collaboration between religious and secular women's organizations**

1. Increase dialogue between secular and religious segments within the women's rights movement, contributing to the strengthening of a broad and heterogeneous women's movement.
2. Seek analytical tools to address women's issues, highlighting the varying grounded realities experienced by women with different backgrounds and in different contexts.
3. Collaborate with local partners and approach women's issues gradually and as an integral part of other challenges, including poverty and political injustices.

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