

The Political Participation of Syrian Women in the Three Influence Zones



**A Descriptive Field Study
Al Furat Center for Studies**

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Introduction

Despite Syrian women demonstrating their effectiveness in popular movements, they have continued to face political, structural, religious, and societal obstacles that, overall, have reduced their roles in decision-making.

What has exacerbated the situation for women is the lack of a protective environment for their independence, both in the traditional and legal sense. The approach to their roles varies according to differences in ideology, political belief, cultural values, and societal perspectives, both supportive and conservative. These variations are influenced by the concepts of gender collaboration in light of the current political, military, and economic situation in areas under the control of the Syrian government, the opposition, and The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

In this section of the study, we will shed light on the participation of Syrian women in positions of authority and decision-making within the Syrian government, the opposition, and The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Using statistical language, digital data, observation, and field interviews with the sample under study, we will deduce the effectiveness or formality of women's contribution in top leadership, political and popular councils, ministries, and similar positions and roles.

The study's axes will be enriched with informational backgrounds and contexts (legal, political, social, historical, etc.) to provide objective and methodical scientific insights into the logical presentation of the researched topic. This will include a focus on using visual representation and graphics to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the content presented smoothly and without ambiguity or confusion.

In this context, we have resorted to the administrative division (intentional) of the geographical boundaries of the study due to the variation and political, ideological, and value-related differences of the parties managing the Syrian conflict zones. This entire matter represents a problem that must be analyzed transparently and accurately.

Therefore, the study is expected to provide descriptive data and graphical indicators (quantitative and qualitative) that explain the variations in support for or reduction of women's rights and their participation in political work in each administration in the

three influential regions in Syria. This will be based on a list of factors that enable or hinder their actual integration into political blocs, illustrating the path of administrative and conceptual approaches to their cause.

Hence, the study has subdivided its general title, "**The Reality and Indicators of Women's Political Participation in the Three Influence Zones,**" into three branching subheadings that will be researched, analyzed, and studied, examining their variables and measuring and interpreting the status of women according to the specificity of each region and the nature of its political system. These subheadings are as follows:

1. Women's Political Participation in the Syrian Regime Government.
2. Women's Political Participation in the Syrian Opposition.
3. Women's Political Participation in The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Study Structure:

The study is divided into three main sections:

The First Section: Methodological Framework.

The Second Section: Analytical Framework.

The Third Section: Results and Recommendations.

Part One:
Methodological Framework

Firstly: The Study Problem and its Questions

There is a deep gap in Syrian society that favors men in occupying a significant portion of leadership and administrative roles within authorities, parties, and organizational structures. This issue stands as one of the most prominent problems that collide with negative historical concepts. Efforts of the progressive present are directed towards issues related to the liberation of societies and the numerous challenges that obstruct the political engagement of women.

To address this issue, the study began with a main problem which is:

To what extent is the political participation of Syrian women effective within the three zones of influence in Syria (the Syrian government, the opposition, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria)?

Secondly: Study Objectives

The study primarily aims to research and analyze the reality of Syrian women's participation in the political field, and to monitor the proportions in which they hold various decision-making positions within the three spheres of influence in Syria. This is done as a form of field comparison. The roles of women are analyzed, and the challenges they face are examined. Based on the scheduled and descriptive data, the practical frameworks are defined to compare the level of decline or increase in gender-related disparities, and to monitor the progress that has occurred in some areas as a result of implementing gender-neutral measures and encouraging women's empowerment programs. The goal is to provide a comprehensive study for legal and human rights organizations to promote respect for the rights of Syrian women among the parties involved in the conflict.

Thirdly: Study Methodology and Type

This study belongs to the descriptive research category as it seeks to investigate, describe, and analyze the roles of Syrian women in the political arena and decision-making. The necessary information and data for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem will be collected primarily through a descriptive (analytical and comparative) methodology.

The study will rely on the descriptive (analytical and comparative) methodology to collect data on the research phenomenon within the study's scope. Data will be collected through field research tools such as interviews and observations, and it will be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The study will also use a comparative methodology to demonstrate statistical differences with social, political, and structural significance.

Fourthly: Study Importance and Concepts

The study, conducted between November 20, 2020, and May 20, 2021, derives its importance from the roles of women as a vital element in establishing democracy and civil liberties, and their essence in practical terms. Women represent a social lever for developing the institutional structure of states and governments. The researched topic represents the pinnacle of intellectual, ideological, and political conflict among the parties in conflict. It can add intellectual value to the reader and provide future Syrian governments with an objective understanding of the reality of women. Moreover, the current study can benefit researchers and human rights and legal organizations when studying the political participation of Syrian women.

Positive Discrimination (Quotas): A form of female representation, it obligates political and administrative powers and blocs to allocate seats representing women within various councils, parliaments, and different organizational administrations. It is one of the temporary solutions for integrating women into decision-making authorities.

Gender Identity: It is the way each person defines their gender, whether male, female, or non-binary. Gender identity represents a set of characteristics that distinguish social gender and the differences between men and women, especially regarding role distribution and opportunities.

Fifthly: Study Sample and Population

The study's population consists of Syrian women, regardless of their political, religious, ethnic, or sectarian affiliations.

Regarding the sample and its selection method, a purposive and random sample was drawn, with a total of (25) primary individual interviews (purposive). The questions

were sent in the form of electronic interviews to the sample in areas that are difficult to access for the most part:

Inside Syria: (Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, Hasakah).

Outside Syria: (Gaziantep, Berlin, Paris).

At the same time, secondary (subsidiary) interviews were conducted with a random sample of (30) individuals. The selection aimed to cover a spectrum of participants who play a fundamental role in advocating for women's rights and hold influential positions in society, especially those knowledgeable about women's liberation issues.

Sixthly: Targeted Category for Study Questions

- Political elites (holding leadership positions in political, party, and administrative structures).
- Women who participated in civil society organizations and popular movements.
- Activists in the media field.
- Women's rights and legal advocates.
- Victims of exclusion and job marginalization.
- Women working in organizations that support and empower women.
- Lecturers at the Faculty of Political Science in Damascus.

Part Two:
Analytical Framework

Women's Political Participation in the Syrian Regime Government



1. Women's Representation in Syrian Regime Government Structures Before the War

Syria has experienced a politically unhealthy environment for decades, lacking fair and just representation, and proper laws regulating political life. The marginalization was not limited to women's representation in political bodies and councils but extended to anyone who thought about changing the political landscape in the country, except those who aligned with the ruling party's policies and executed its partisan agendas without hesitation or conditions.

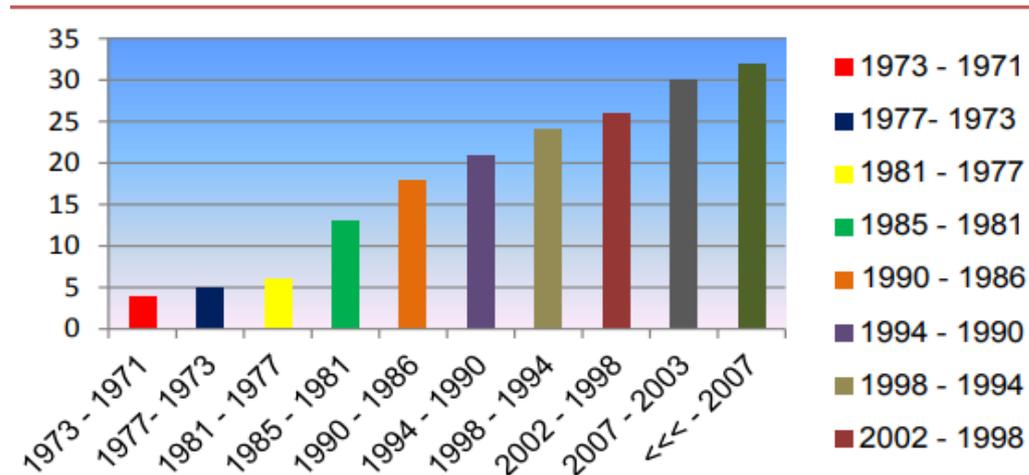
In general, there was a disparity in the representation of women in administrative structures, government entities, and decision-making centers. Women's representation percentages were generally low and did not grant women equality in political, social, and economic aspects. This is evident in the Gender Gap Index released by the World Economic Forum for the year 2020, where Syria ranked last, standing at 150th place out of 153 countries, whereas it was at 125th place in 2010. (1)

Syria also ranked 153rd out of 156 countries in the CEOWORLD magazine's report on the best countries for women. (2)

These numbers demonstrate the wide gap between the plans and strategies of successive Syrian governments, which nominally support women's issues, and the actual removal of obstacles hindering their effective participation in political and economic life, as stipulated in Article 45 of the Syrian Constitution. This conflicting approach may undermine the stability of the Syrian state, from the smallest family nucleus to the fragile representation of women in decision-making circles and strategy development.

In general, despite the ruling Ba'ath Party's belief that "full popular democracy will remain stunted as long as women are distant from the public affairs of society," these traditional theoretical perspectives are nothing more than a paper display with no practical value. They fall into the category of political propaganda through which the party attempts to deceive society into believing its support for women's rights. The best evidence of the party's contradiction with its own concepts is that Syria has not seen a woman assume the presidency of the country to this day. Women have remained far from even competing in presidential elections. Furthermore, the representation of Syrian women in the government during the Ba'ath Party's rule from 1976 to 2009 did not exceed 3% to 6%, and in the People's Assembly from 1971 to 2007, it ranged from

2% to 12%, according to a study conducted by Dr. Shaher Al-Shaher, a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Damascus.



The The representation of women in the Syrian People's Assembly (Adapted from Dr. Shaher Al-Shaher's study) - Figure (1)

The marginalization of women is not limited to numbers alone. The Syrian government still reserves many reservations about various international conventions supporting women's rights, including CEDAW, under the pretext that it does not align with Syrian society's identity, contradicts its customs, and violates its traditional values. In reality, we can consider this as one of the government's methods to maintain the status quo and gain the approval of traditional forces that are conservative about women's participation in political and public life.

Furthermore, there is the personal appropriation of female figures loyal to the Ba'ath Party in some positions, in the form of a princely rule (they preserve the interests of the ruling party against women's interests). This continues indefinitely (for long decades). We can observe this in the appointment decision made by the former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in 1975 to appoint **Ghada Murad** as the country's first female judge. Later, her duties were renewed in the judiciary after the current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued a presidential decree in 2005 appointing her as the head of the Syrian judicial committee responsible for investigating those involved in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The same applies to **Najah al-Attar**, who held the position of Minister of Culture and National Guidance from 1976 to 2000, and then became the Deputy to the current Syrian President. Additionally, **Bouthaina Shaaban**, who held many important positions as a political and media advisor to the Syrian President, Minister of State for Expatriates, and the list goes on. All of this follows the approach of maintaining the continuity of the ruling regime by recruiting women with power and influence.

2. Women's Representation in the People's Assembly

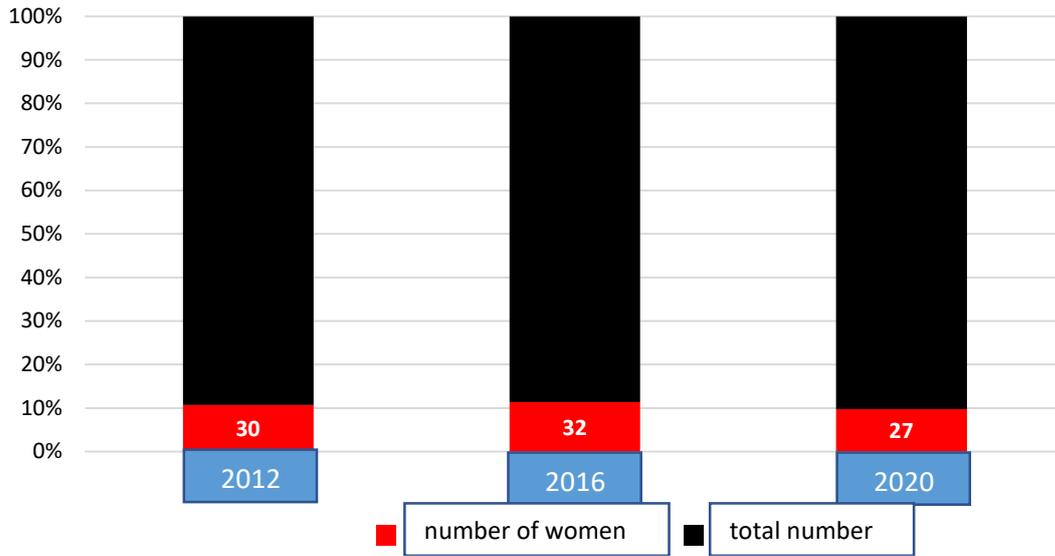
The 1959 Constitution was the first legislative document to grant Syrian women the right to run for the People's Assembly (Parliament) elections. However, despite these efforts, it was not successful, and it was Thurya al-Hafez who was the first woman to nominate herself as a member of the council. Later, Jihan al-Mosuli (an advocate for women's rights) and Widad al-Azhari succeeded in reaching the People's Assembly in 1960.

The situation for women remained unchanged until the Ba'ath Party came to power. While the representation of women in the People's Assembly increased proportionally, it did not take the women's issues out of the party and Arab framework, as seen in government formations. This is evident in Table 1, which shows the weak representation of women in the Syrian People's Assembly:

Year	Number of Women in the People's Assembly	Total Number	Percentage
2012	30	250	12%
2016	32	250	12.8%
2020	27	250	10.8%

Table 1: Women's Participation in the Syrian People's Assembly

Womens percentage in the People's Assembly



Women's participation in the Syrian People's Assembly, Figure No. (2)



Percentage of seats occupied by women in the Syrian People's Assembly – Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, Figure No. (3)

In addition to the low representation percentages, women who do manage to enter the Syrian People's Assembly lack substantial roles to change the status quo for women in the country. They tend to align with the interests of the ruling authorities, and women's rights and empowerment issues are often absent from their electoral programs.

Commenting on the representation of women in the Syrian People's Assembly, **Araba Mahfoud**, a member of the Assembly (who ran as an independent but is loyal to the Ba'ath Party), mentions that women have played an effective role despite their weak presence. Some have held positions such as Vice President, parliamentary, ministerial, and administrative roles.

Looking at Table 1, it shows an increase in the percentage of women's presence in 2016, marking the highest representation since women were granted membership rights. However, this percentage decreased in the past year. Parliamentary representation has seen some favoritism towards military and security personnel, such as General Bassma Shatir, entering the People's Assembly. Additionally, the Syrian government has recently leaned towards engaging with some minority groups at the expense of others. This is seen as a form of domestic and international political marketing. It appears as if the government is now focusing on minority rights after ten years of war. This can be observed in the experience of the first legislative representation of Armenian women in Syria, represented by **Mrs. Nora Araisian**. She believes that women's representation should be raised to the required percentage, ideally half or at least one-third. She also emphasizes that women's inclusion should come from the adaptability of the ready societal foundation to accept women in decision-making positions, followed by the government and the state's role in appointing women to high positions in the political field.

Here we must take into consideration the security and political circumstances that are not objectively neutral in the government-controlled areas of Syria. This is a valid reason why many members of the People's Assembly refrain from providing transparent personal statements. They are not authorized to deviate from the state's discourse, and they do not enjoy the legal immunity that protects them from security harassment and arrest. Many female political activists and journalists who expressed their opinions and advocated for their political and civil rights since the beginning of the Syrian crisis remain unknown in the prisons of the Syrian government. Some of them have even been reportedly executed inside the prisons, as shown in images revealed by a Syrian military photographer known as "Caesar."

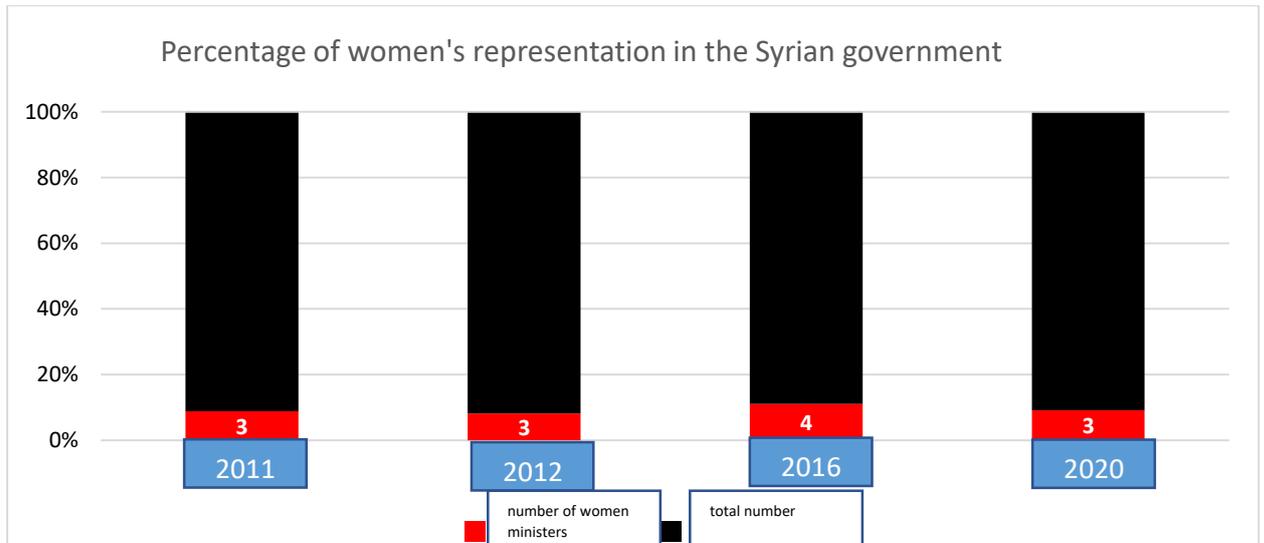
3. Women's representation in the Syrian Regime government

Syrian women held their first ministerial position in 1976 when they began their participation in the government with just one ministry, the Ministry of Culture. It wasn't until 1991 that women assumed their second ministerial role when one of them took charge of the Ministry of Higher Education. However, this representation was closer to individual representation rather than being part of a unified women's group. (3)

Nevertheless, women's representation in the Syrian government remains timid and unfair, even when they reach high levels of diplomatic representation and presidential appointments. Table number (2) shows the percentages of women holding ministerial positions, which have remained nearly constant since 2011 to the present day, with a slight change in their representation in 2016. Based on analysis and research, most of those chosen to hold ministerial positions, similar to the People's Assembly scene, belong to the Ba'ath Party or have implicit loyalty to this party. They may publicly declare their independence from political parties, but their ideological orientation and geographic environments prove otherwise. In contrast, many of them hold advanced degrees, indicating their academic and administrative qualifications. However, they are more constrained by narrow party thinking or the political climate they belong to. This has not brought about any significant positive changes, either substantively or in the overall situation of Syrian women, especially in leadership roles, over the past five decades.

Year	Government	Number of Women Ministers	Total Number of Ministers	Percentage
2011	Adel Safar's Government	3	31	9.67%
2012	Riyad Hijab's Government	3	34	8.82%
2016	Wael al-Halqi's Government	4	32	12.5%
2020	Hussein Arnous's Government	3	30	10%

Table number (2) Women's Participation in the Syrian Government



Women's participation in the Syrian government, Figure No. (4)

Indeed, despite the low level of representation of women in the Syrian government, women like "Lamees Al-Aasi," "Saleha Sankar," and "Bouthaina Shaaban" have held sovereign positions such as the ministries of tourism, economy, higher education, and expatriate affairs. However, representation has been lacking in terms of the youth element, as the ages of most of the women holding these positions range from 55 to 65 and above. Therefore, it can be inferred that the Syrian government simultaneously relies, alongside the low level of women's representation in ministerial structures, on the ideological circle of the ruling party. Certainly, such an approach undermines any opportunity to build a state based on fairness and integrity in representing societal segments correctly.

In conclusion, we cannot talk about homogeneous representation of both genders within the government or the Syrian People's Assembly, or expect any qualitative shift in the vision of women's issues without starting from a political environment that believes in administrative participation. This means involving women equally with men from the political base to the top of the hierarchy. Decision-making processes need to be institutionalized and take on a complex, multi-faceted character where all individuals participate under an objective umbrella that achieves fair representation for all groups. The idea of representation based on the majority of an individual's gender should be eliminated.

4. Factors Behind the Low Representation of Women in Syrian Regime Government Structures

The low representation of women in Syrian government institutions can be attributed to several factors, including political, ideological, legal, and societal factors:

1) Lack of State Building Components

In reality, Syria has lacked the essential components for building a civil state since its inception. Despite the presence of a constitution and laws, they are essentially symbolic and not effectively implemented. They are subject to the orientations and interests of the national police regime that governs the country. Syrians often view many of the legal foundations promoted by the Syrian government as mere "ink on paper" that has no real-world application and does not benefit them in any way. In a functioning civil state that believes in democracy and human rights, the priorities lie in strengthening citizenship values, guaranteeing freedoms, ensuring the independence of the elements of sustainable statehood, apart from imposing national and party biases on state institutions and structures, and consolidating a policy of exclusion and marginalization.

2) Absence of a Feminist Political Body

There is a fundamental truth that the absence of a feminist political body that ensures the political, social, and economic status of women and guarantees their legitimate rights within the constitution exposes women to various forms of violence, exploitation, and violations. It makes them more susceptible to the confiscation of their decisions and destinies. This is what the working women in the Syrian government genuinely suffer from, as they lack an independent women's body or women's empowerment councils that could be a real contributor to the representation of Syrian women and an advocate for their rights. With the exception of earlier initiatives by the General Women's Union, funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women in 2006 to promote women's participation in political processes, they were not effectively implemented, and the situation remained largely unchanged.

The General Women's Union remained the only symbolic representative entity for women over the past five decades, but it failed to bring about substantial reforms

concerning women's issues in Syria. Instead, it has become a tool to fill some government positions with women who have unwavering loyalty to the ruling party. These women lack independence in decision-making, and the Union has essentially been a women's umbrella organization attached to the ruling political system. Like other civil society organizations, it contributes to maintaining the power of the regime by preparing cadres from early educational stages. Examples include the Baath Vanguard Organization, followed by the Revolutionary Youth Union, the Student Union, in addition to other organizations such as the Peasants Union, the General Workers Syndicate, the Sports Union, and more. (4)

3) Absence of Regulatory Laws for Political and Civil Life

Discussing women's rights within the Syrian government cannot be done without addressing the legal safety nets. In reality, the legal status of women has not seen any significant changes. Although most Syrian constitutions have unanimously agreed on the necessity of granting women their rights, women today lack any legal framework to guarantee their participation in political and economic activities. They continue to be subjected to the Penal Code of 1949, the Personal Status Law of 1953, and the Nationality Law of 1969. These laws are considered to be discriminatory and grant males authority within the family, limiting women's rights both within their families and in their personal lives. (5) This situation multiplies their concerns and problems, leaving them without legal protection or effective programs to address their demands in the legislative and executive processes.

Because the legal aspect represents one of the most significant indicators of integrity and seriousness in either liberating or silencing women's voices, the Syrian government does not allow women to actively participate in many of its constitutional provisions. It strips them of legitimate civil rights. It's worth noting that Syrian law remains vague regarding the granting of citizenship by Syrian women to their children, especially when they opt for the paternal lineage to grant citizenship to the child of the unknown Syrian father. This is subject to two conditions: first, that the mother is Syrian by nationality at the time of birth, and second, that the birth occurs in Syria. (6)

This is in the context of the limited access to political rights and freedoms, which clash with the absence of regulatory laws for political life. Syria has not witnessed clear

programs related to women's liberation or independent women's groups capable of making political decisions and enabling effective political participation for women. Even today, licenses are denied to local non-governmental organizations in the country, especially civil society organizations that advocate for marginalized groups in society. There are also legal restrictions on the establishment of women's or opposition political parties that engage in political activities outside the framework of the all-encompassing discourse of the Progressive National Front led by the ruling Baath Party. This exclusionary approach contradicts the identity of the Syrian state, which was somewhat supportive of women's organizations and the formation of political parties in the 1940s.

4) Limiting the Role of Women in Educational Curricula

Indicators of gender discrimination affect one of the most crucial areas that influence the intellectual and structural development of society: the educational and pedagogical system. This system has remained and continues to be subject to the dominance of a single cultural heritage in its content. It often overlooks the essential role of women alongside men in raising generations and developing communities.

After analyzing a random sample of some educational curriculum textbooks for both primary and secondary levels, it was found that issues related to women's roles have not been studied and presented independently and objectively, free from stereotypes. Conformity has dominated their overall portrayal.

Introduction

In this context, geographical boundaries are divided according to the opposition's areas of control into two main regions: the first includes areas under the administration of the Syrian Interim Government (northern and eastern rural Aleppo, western rural Aleppo, and pockets along the border in the Hasakah and Raqqa regions). The second region encompasses areas under the administration of the Syrian Salvation Government (Idlib and its countryside).

Since both local administrations share the same ideological vision, conceptual framework, and values regarding women's issues, the status of women in each region has not been studied separately. Instead, a collective approach to the research topic has been adopted.

First: Syrian Women in the Context of the Opposition

Syrian women played a significant role in the course of the popular uprising, taking on prominent leadership roles in coordination committees and civil assemblies, especially in humanitarian and relief work. At times, they even participated in the security and military aspects, as seen in the experiences of women like Alma Shihoud and Thawiba Kanfani. This was a natural response to the violence directed against them and a retaliation against the Syrian government's actions during the early stages of the Syrian revolution. However, after a few months and a shift away from the slogans of the Syrian revolution, women's roles began to gradually recede, particularly as the peaceful popular movement evolved into an armed conflict, accompanied by sectarian tensions. This period also saw the emergence of extremist military groups, which strongly opposed women's participation in public life.

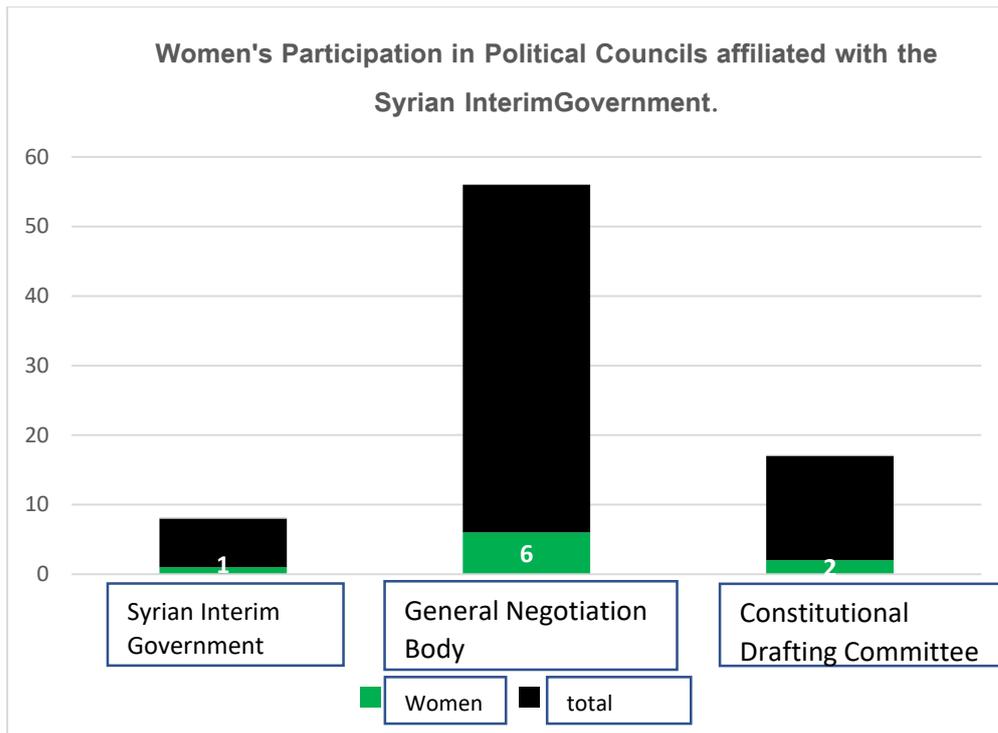
Therefore, in the midst of the recurring events of war, Syrian women, the "revolutionaries," found themselves suffering from dual constraints and pains. Some of them saw the first enemy as the Syrian government, accused of eliminating and torturing thousands of women according to reports from Human Rights Watch (7). The second enemy was the leadership of the armed opposition with strong religious extremist tendencies. They feared that the civil, secular nature of the popular demands, along with the feminist tendencies inspired by the Syrian street's momentum, would

lead to the loss of popular support for them in favor of the civil forces at the expense of Islamic opposition factions. As a result, the fate of some female political and feminist activists like Razan Zaitouneh and Samira Khalil ended in field executions or forced disappearances. These brutal practices were preemptive indicators of the "control and punishment" policy, serving as collective punishment for those who defied the authority of the leaders of the rebel military factions.

After 10 years of war in Syria, and with the Syrian opposition losing control of many areas to the Syrian government, extremist tendencies within various Syrian opposition factions, both political and military, continue to dominate the scene. This is especially evident when it comes to the prospects of women's involvement in the political process within the areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government and the Syrian Salvation Government. Tables (3) and (4) illustrate the marginal role of women in the political structures of the Syrian opposition, represented by the Syrian Interim Government and the Syrian Salvation Government, which is considered the civilian arm of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra).

Percentage	Total Number	Number of Women	Functional Participation	Year 2020
%14.28	7	1	Syrian Interim Government	
12%	50	6	General Negotiation Body	
13.33%	15	2	Constitutional Drafting Committee	

Table (3): Women's Participation in Political Councils affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government.



Women's participation in the political councils of the Syrian Interim Government, Figure No. (5)

Women's political participation in Syria has been surrounded by obstacles and challenges in various forms, without being reinforced by legal protection. Women have faced restrictions, threats, and have often been forced to resign, as exemplified by the recent incident in which Dr. Huda Al-Abssi was compelled to resign from the Ministry of Education in the Syrian Interim Government affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition. She faced insults and threats from some opposition leaders who were unable to present a democratic alternative model to Bashar al-Assad's government.

Most of these opposition leaders are under the dominance of armed forces, accompanied by a violent male-centric mentality that does not prioritize supporting women's representation in political work. Even though there have been some experiments, they have not gone beyond the framework of diluting the issues, dragging them into the realm of external propaganda.

Percentage	Total Number	Number of Women	Functional Participation	Year
14%	-	-	Local Councils	2018
0%	11	0	Syrian Salvation Government	2020

Table (4): Women's Participation in Political Councils of the Syrian Salvation Government.

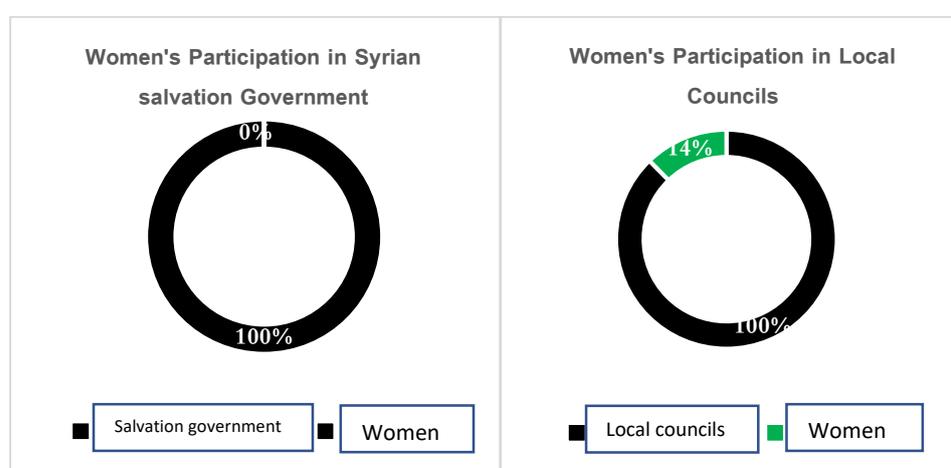


Figure No. (7)

Figure No. (6)

Expanding on the previous tables, when we look back at related data, we can infer from the numerical language that women's participation had weight and significance in the popular sphere, especially in the management and organization of coordination committees. However, their role in local councils has declined, and this role varies by region. For example, the percentage of women in the local council in Idlib reached 25% in 2012, with 5 women out of 20 council members. Now, statistics from human rights organizations indicate that their representation is below 2%. In contrast, the Syrian National Coalition, representing the political base of the Interim Government, includes six women in the General Assembly, one woman in the Political Committee, and one woman in the Presidential Committee. One woman also holds the position of Deputy President of the Coalition. Syrian women also made up 30% of the members of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The final list of the Constitutional Committee

comprises 150 names, equally divided among the three lists. Women have six seats in the Negotiating Body list and 19 seats in the Civil Society list.

As for the Political Committee in Idlib, its first session witnessed the absence of women's participation. In the second session, one woman participated, followed by two women in the third session, and three women in the fourth session (information obtained from field sources through communication with civil institutions concerned with the matter in the Idlib region).

Secondly: Obstacles to Women's Participation in Opposition Bodies and Councils

To discuss the reality of women's political participation in opposition structures, we relied on field testimonies from various opposition-held areas to enrich the documentary aspect of the study. It's important to note that we faced challenges in accessing leaders in the Syrian National Coalition and other opposition bodies, despite our repeated attempts to contact them. Therefore, we relied on permissions and media statements from some of them at different times. Additionally, we were able to reach random samples of women involved in political and humanitarian work to survey their opinions regarding women's political participation in the Syrian Interim Government and the Salvation Government. This allowed us to achieve functional coherence between the levels of the surveyed sample. We conducted this process by sending research interview questions electronically to those relevant based on their job specialization.

Naturally, there is variation in views on women's roles in politics and the obstacles they face in breaking free from societal and legal constraints. However, many of the testimonies from the women we interviewed converged. The most significant reasons for the decline in women's roles can be attributed to the militarization of the Syrian popular movement, the rise of extremist Islamic currents, the sidelining of the peaceful movement, as well as diverse sources of funding that imposed "non-national agendas" on the political scene. These can be summarized as follows:

1) Women's Employment for International Recognition

In reality, the presence of women within the political body of the Syrian opposition seemed to be limited, according to some members of the coalition, to token discussions and cosmetic appearances during some peripheral meetings. They were not adequately represented in leadership and top bodies. When women were present, it often resulted from international pressure on the opposition to increase female representation and enhance their participation, especially in diplomatic circles.

Even the Advisory Council formed in Geneva by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, in February 2015, consisting of 40 women to support the opposition delegation as an independent body to empower and represent women and increase their participation in the negotiation process, lacked clear criteria and selection procedures. It was criticized for a lack of transparency, objectivity, and for being selective in its choices. Their representation was not convincing, as it only extended to two women out of 22 members in the Higher Negotiation Committee and three out of 15 members at the negotiation table. De Mistura commented on the presence of some of them in the negotiation rooms, saying, "They do not speak, they are not allowed to speak, and they do not have a chance to intervene. They are on the margins." The political leadership of the coalition also experienced internal problems and severe conflicts. Involving this women's body meant weakening the voices of traditional factions, but ultimately, it had to yield to Western demands for fear of losing support, funding, and ending the remaining diplomatic and political cover it enjoyed from the West.

Here, it can be said that despite the changing names of political blocs within the Syrian opposition, they remain rigid, and those in charge still exhibit the same exclusionary mindset. This exclusionary approach is one of the most problematic aspects of Syrian politics. Before the Syrian National Coalition, the Syrian National Council had an entirely male presence in its early sessions. Under Western pressure, the council was forced to include women in some of its meetings. A member of the Syrian National Council described what happened during the Friends of Syria conference held in Tunis on February 24, 2012: "All the Syrian delegation, about 25-30 men, were inside the hall, while women were left outside. Some women were later allowed in after Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton inquired about them. One of them personally

asked me to let her in, but I apologized to her because she came at the request of the West, not the Syrians themselves. Imagine the isolation of women; Clinton was shocked when she couldn't find any women from the opposition. For her, the political scene ends if it doesn't include at least 30% women." She added, "There was a significant number of women at the start of the Syrian National Council, and they were active and dynamic. However, they retreated and withdrew due to the way they were treated." (8)

In summary, the opposition was in desperate need of appeasing foreign powers and gaining international sympathy by superficially increasing women's representation within its ranks. This was after it failed to gain popular support due to its policy of exclusion and marginalization, which affected various societal segments. As a result, the opposition turned its compass towards gaining legitimacy from external sources. This, however, stripped it of its ability to independently make national decisions, as it became reliant on conditional support from foreign states. Consequently, the opposition had to consider the transboundary interests of many of its supporters.

2) Negative Perception of the Opposition

According to the testimony of Huda Sarjaoui, a lawyer and legal activist in Idlib, women are not adequately represented in opposition institutions. Despite quotas being announced by De Mistura and endorsed by some entities, they have not been implemented effectively within opposition structures. This can be attributed to several challenges:

1. Lack of genuine desire and will to involve women adequately and fairly in the political sphere.
2. Insufficient pressure from countries supporting the Syrian opposition to promote women's political participation.
3. Many women are not willing to engage in the political experience due to the negative perception of the opposition, its loss of credibility and trust within the opposition's constituency.

At the same time, some activists believe that women still struggle to assert themselves amidst an immense amount of difficulties and obstacles that hinder their effective political participation. These difficulties include the general economic situation, factors related to the identity of the ruling political institution, societal nature, prevailing

culture, family traditions, and the absence of an entity dedicated to protecting active, leading, and political women from all forms of violence. Additionally, they face security pressures and challenges, along with burdens that many displaced women carry, such as providing for their families. However, most of the respondents linked the deterioration of their situations to the failure of the opposition's policy, its inconsistency, and its submission to the directives of neighboring countries. This has caused them to lose faith in the principles and orientations of current political councils, leading many women to distance themselves from political activity as long as they do not have the initiative and independence in making political decisions.

3) Rise of Militarization, Extremism, and the Reinforcement of Societal Restrictions

After a few months of peaceful protests, the Syrian revolution took a violent turn, marked by the militarization of the movement. Many Syrians initially expected the end of President Bashar al-Assad's rule within a few months, had it not been for the intervention of Iranian and Russian allies. Nonetheless, the outlines of the deviation of the moderate militarization trajectory began to emerge. What began as more organized and disciplined military battalions, supporting the people's demands, evolved into extremist militias with diverse orientations and loyalties. Some of them joined the battle to counter the Iranian influence, transforming the scene from a peaceful Syrian movement into a transborder sectarian conflict that the Syrian people continue to suffer from today, with no apparent solution on the horizon.

To avoid delving too far into the past and straying from our research focus, we will limit our examination to the conditions of women under the rule of multiple military factions in opposition-controlled areas.

Starting with Idlib, where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) holds sway, an extremist ideology and foreign ideas that are alien to the Syrian identity are imposed. This has even led to the withdrawal of funding from civil society organizations that support women's empowerment. Legal decrees were issued through the "Hands of Good" organization, the civil police in Idlib, prohibiting female journalists from practicing their profession – Radio Fresh being a notable example. The

justification given was that they were violating Islamic Sharia and that "their voices are awrah (a term referring to areas of the body that must be covered)." Consequently, the roles of women have been limited to certain training workshops and involvement in relief efforts, as well as receiving support and training from women's organizations focused on women's empowerment.

As a result, in the context of tightened security control and the dominance of social norms, some of the interviewees fear that empowering women and increasing their political awareness in opposition-held areas may lead to a clash between their values and liberation on one side and the armed factions on the other. This could also collide with societal customs and the frameworks that confine women's opinions and voices. Consequently, this negatively affects their lifestyles and reputations. In essence, their conservative societies are not intellectually prepared to accept women's leadership, where women co-manage the community alongside men. This creates a divisive and contentious split between those who support, those who are cautious about, and those who oppose women's participation in political work.

Regarding the prospects for women's representation in the councils and leadership bodies of the opposition, Ghaliya Al-Rahal (Head of the Women's Office and founder of the Women's Empowerment organization "Mazaya" in Idlib), notes a noticeable decline in the shares of women's representation in the closed circles of decision-making centers. She sees this representation as largely symbolic, primarily for media purposes. She believes that the political challenges faced by women inside Syria differ from those faced by women outside the country. She explains: "Inside Syria, the reason for the absence of women in the political field can be attributed to legal constraints, along with societal culture and family customs that reinforce patriarchal culture within the community. This culture assumes that positions of power are reserved for men, and it limits women's presence to the narrow domestic sphere, excluding them from the political sphere. Therefore, the limited participation of women in the political field is not due to their inability to participate, but primarily due to the militarization of the situation to the extreme. This militarization was accompanied by a gradual shift in the revolutionary movement from a civilian nature that welcomed women's participation to a military and religious nature that marginalized women completely. The final say now lies with extremist factions hostile to the presence of women in public affairs, supported

by the dominance of male thinking and traditional mechanisms that oppose democracy (such as family representation and favoritism towards men) in these places." Al-Rahal envisions the establishment of a political and human rights platform that includes active female leaders. This platform would generate decisions and recommendations focused on the broader Syrian political landscape.

4) Discriminatory Laws that Disadvantage Women

As the form and behavior of administration vary in opposition areas according to the armed faction and its cultural backgrounds, the legal system also faces differences and challenges. In the Syrian Interim Government-controlled areas, judges have been selected from lawyers and defectors from the Syrian judicial system to apply the Unified Arab Law based on the 1950 constitution (most of its provisions and texts are based on Islamic law according to the four major schools of thought). On the other hand, the 'Salvation Government' in Idlib adopts Islamic Sharia law, enforced by local courts consisting of religious scholars and individuals undergoing religious training (most of whom lack formal legal qualifications). Their primary reference is the Higher Judiciary Council. In addition, there is a lack of professional judges and lawyers, with individuals imposed by the ruling factions in these areas. In both administrations, there are legal gaps and restrictions that affect women's lives, depriving them of basic civil rights such as personal status matters and equal participation with men in the workforce. Furthermore, their laws, to some extent, resemble those imposed by the Syrian constitution. However, they have taken on a more rigid religious tone in many areas, especially when resorting to *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) to impose judgments subject to political power and authority."

The law can be examined from the perspective of the extreme ideological, political, and social choices of the Salafi movement, specifically through the Charter of the "Syrian Islamic Front," which outlined the relationships between the Syrian components in the eighth paragraph of the fourth chapter: "The relationship between women and men is complementary. The role of women must be based on the absolute provisions of Sharia law and its general objectives, rejecting Western attempts to modernize women's roles and take them out of the Islamic framework. Islam is the religion of the state, the primary and sole source of legislation. We will use all legitimate methods to ensure that

no law is enacted in the country that contradicts the principles established in Islamic Sharia law." (9)

Professor Mohammed Noor Hamdan, speaking to "The New Arab" about the state of the judiciary in areas under opposition control, says: "The main pillars of the judiciary being effective are the independence of the judiciary, the availability of executive power to enforce judicial decisions and rulings, the competence, integrity, and protection of the judge." He adds: "One of the difficulties facing the judicial institution is the confusion regarding the legal framework. The region is unstable, and the executive authority is weak and unable to protect the judge." (10)

Generally, the mechanism for issuing and implementing laws in opposition-controlled areas takes on a religious character (religious bodies) that doesn't align with the Syrians' environment and the requirements of the current situation. It is manipulated and subject to the dominance of the armed factions controlling these areas, such as the Syrian National Army, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Guardians of Religion, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, and the Liberation Party.

5) Women's belief in the justice of their cause

This is repeated in opposition-controlled areas, largely due to the policies of successive governments in Syria, which have marginalized women in the political scene and confined their roles within the boundaries of the family.

Nevertheless, some of the women we spoke to believe in the absence of feminist thinking, and their image is closer to an acknowledgment of traditional roles that limit women's independence. They don't believe much in a woman's ability to take on high-ranking positions in politics. They considered women more suitable for managing service, relief, and family affairs, stating that, according to some of them, "God did not create women for politics." Others even cited religious texts, such as "A people will not succeed if they make a woman their leader." In reality, this narrow approach to women's potential, sometimes originating from within the female community, as seen in the recent testimony, strongly indicates their influence on a social environment that marginalizes women's roles and limits them to mere followers with no power except to obey orders and instructions. It's a negative indicator of how many of them have lost

hope or, to put it accurately, deceived themselves into believing they don't possess the capability or qualifications to keep pace with men or participate in decision-making. Naturally, this negative perspective falls under the category of loss of motivation and self-drive, stemming from a deeply rooted culture in the collective unconscious of many women.

Regarding the diminishing role of women in areas such as family and relief, where their representation does not meet the needs of a broad segment of society and does not fulfill legal requirements, one worker in civil society organizations in western rural Aleppo says, "Certainly, the role of women should not be minimized. Their presence in the political process is essential to represent the rights of families and children. Even if some men advocate for women, they will not reach the level of advocacy that women themselves can achieve for their own issues."

In contrast, one of the feminist activists adds to the above statement, emphasizing that "a woman's battle in defending her rights is harder than all wars. Women and men complement each other, and men should actively support women, not just through cosmetic images or marginal roles. Women should also believe in the justice of their cause and their rights, be confident in themselves, and continuously train themselves to engage in political fields and its extensions."

While a woman's self-confidence requires professional empowerment and the enhancement of her communication, debate, and self-expression skills, according to Samah Hidayah, a former minister in the Syrian Interim Government. She stresses that a woman's work should not be limited to women's or gender associations; it should be deeply rooted, comprehensive, expansive, and forward-looking. A woman should not be in a political position just to satisfy numbers and donors but should be an active participant in her community, her home, her life, protected by laws and the constitution, not solely dependent on her father, brother, husband, or values. She should love herself, be aware of herself, and respect herself. She should learn and acquire knowledge because, as she says, knowledge and thought are the foundation. It is necessary for women to refine and develop their skills, participate in building the human community.

6) Women: Victims of External Power Struggles

In light of the internal divisions within the opposition forces and their failure to formulate clear strategic goals that serve the Syrian revolution, coupled with the diversity of political, ideological, and sectarian orientations among regional and international supporters, the Syrian opposition, in all its formations and labels, has become subservient and lacks decision-making power. It has become a mere tool for carrying out foreign agendas and has failed to meet the challenges it has faced both internally and externally. For example, Turkish support represented a strategic turning point in transforming opposition-controlled areas into military strongholds and bargaining chips for various regional actors to leverage for political or economic gains.

Moreover, the diversity and differing interests and visions of the supporting parties have created a state of chaos in opposition-held areas, with women being the first victims on the scene since the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

The testimony of a female politician within the National Coalition sheds light on the role of foreign intervention in excluding competent individuals in general, and women in particular, during the elections for the presidency of the opposition National Coalition. She states, "The situation within the Coalition is a political calculation. When nominations occur, they look for the luckiest person, and it's not about competence. Today's politics is a state of political rivalry. Women who are not internationally supported and are not subject to the political rivalries have very little chance of reaching any position because the Coalition cannot create an advocacy process that supports them. Quite frankly, there was a state of rivalry between the Qatari bloc and the Saudi bloc, and those who are in the middle, not aligned with either side, have very little opportunity to get anywhere." (12)

In short, it can be said that women are the weakest link in the path of political conflicts between external sources of support and internal execution tools. Even when they are involved in political work, it is often based on biased backgrounds and agendas that are not objective in strategically representing women.

7) The Dominance of Partisanship and Loyalties

The criteria and standards for women's integration into opposition political blocs are also influenced by affiliations and sectarian loyalties. (13) Here, Dima Moussa, a member of the Syrian National Coalition, clarifies the criteria for selecting female members. She believes that these criteria are primarily based on "partisanship, followed by competence and involvement in revolutionary work." The exclusion of women, according to her perspective, is not limited to the level of political representation within the Syrian Coalition but extends to all political and "revolutionary" bodies. No political or civil body has committed to representing women in any form, and the women's quota, which is based on representing women by no less than 30% in any opposition structure, has not been implemented. Women's roles are confined within traditional roles in political councils dominated by partisan, nationalist, and religious sectarianism. One of the main reasons for the deviation of the "revolution" from peaceful activism towards militarization is the marginalization of women's status in civil and political activism. As a result, women lost their stability and became preoccupied with managing family affairs and compensating for the loss of the provider (the man) by taking on work and household responsibilities.

According to studies conducted by opposition women's organizations, the representation of women in the Syrian opposition coalition is less than 10%, and in the local councils, it does not exceed 2%.

On the other hand, Khawla Dounia, the director of the Syrian Women's Network office in Gaziantep, Turkey, and a member of the Syrian women's political movement, believes that the exclusion of women from the beginning of the "Syrian revolution" in 2011 was intentional. The main reason for this exclusion, she asserts, is primarily regional, tribal, ethnic, or sectarian considerations that prioritize these affiliations over the fair representation of women. (14)

8) The Image of Women in Educational Curricula

Regarding the educational curricula taught by the Syrian Interim Government, they have largely followed the old curricula of the Syrian government, which were in place

before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, according to statements made by the Minister of Education, Dr. Imad Barak. However, some modifications have been made by the interim Syrian government to remove "symbols of the Syrian regime" and "symbols of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party" and to add symbols related to the "Syrian revolution." (15)

According to our analysis of several studies on the image of women in the educational curricula of the Syrian opposition, most of them have identified several challenges that hinder the positive portrayal of women in the curricula. These challenges are primarily related to the multiplicity of authorities controlling the geography of opposition-held areas, their differing ideological orientations, and the imposition of religious and social lessons that glorify men, depicting them as pious, strong, and possessing leadership qualities. In contrast, women are portrayed to students as subordinate, weak, and confined to domestic roles, living under the guardianship of men. This image stems from a culture that marginalizes women, reducing their identity to that of mere victims (e.g., sisters of martyrs or wives of martyrs) while ignoring their role as free, revolutionary, and activist women aspiring to bring about political change and establish democracy in the country.

Of course, this image varies, as mentioned earlier, depending on the military faction in control of the region. In areas under the control of the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib, for example, educational curricula closely resemble those of the Islamic State organization (ISIS) and strictly impose limitations on the public presence of women, such as restrictions on women's external appearance or even their ability to go to markets (travel restrictions). In contrast, in the areas under the Interim Syrian government, which are somewhat more flexible, there is limited room for women to participate in public life. However, there is a lack of emphasis on values, culture, and political awareness that would empower women to engage actively in the political process and make decisions on an equal footing with men. Thus, social and mental patterns continue to dominate, influencing any field in which women aspire to participate, as long as the educational curricula carry non-enlightened ideas about women's issues.

Thirdly: Legal and Feminist Solutions to Activate Women's Representation

The legal aspect provides the most precise insight into the extent of the gap in fair representation of societal segments in decision-making. Therefore, Huda Sarjaoui, a lawyer and legal activist, believes that several laws can be enacted to support women's political participation. One of these is quotas, a positive discrimination policy that ensures women access to leadership positions. However, it should be accompanied by the selection of qualified women to prevent their presence in these positions from being merely symbolic. Additionally, the electoral law should mandate political parties to include at least 30% women on their candidate lists, with rotational names. It should adopt a proportional representation electoral system, especially for women's representation. The constitution should guarantee fair representation of women in all positions. Pressure from supporting countries is necessary to achieve this percentage. Furthermore, raising awareness in society about the importance of women's participation is crucial, as well as the political empowerment of interested women, capacity building, and providing opportunities for them to develop their experience through progression in leadership roles. Sarjaoui emphasizes the importance of women's participation in trade unions and civil society organizations as bodies that contribute to developing expertise for engagement in public affairs.

As for how women can be feminist and capable of defending their rights, a revolutionary activist (who chose not to disclose her identity) working for one of the local councils in northern rural Aleppo says, "To be a free feminist, I must not be under the mercy and authority of pressures, religious authorities, societal pressures, domestic or gender-based violence, and I must not work in fields of politics based on gender discrimination. So, in my opinion, the separation of religion from civil laws is an important issue, and we should start from the principles of universal human justice. Unfortunately, our Syrian society in general, and northwest of the country in particular, is more influenced by religion than by legal influence."

Women's Political Participation in the Autonomous Administration



Introduction

Women in the areas of the Autonomous Administration hold a unique and distinctive position, unlike other Syrian regions. Their participation in terms of quantitative representation in the institutions of North and East Syria is a promising experience, deviating from traditional patterns and rigid customs. Women record the highest presence in administrative structures (civil and military). They also enjoy various forms of legal immunity, as the Autonomous Administration has enacted laws that ensure their equal and homogeneous representation alongside men.

Undoubtedly, the open atmosphere for women's integration in various fields and the presence of political will to support their rights have brought about changes in many traditional inherited concepts. It has also gained external sympathy, garnering significant international media coverage that has focused on activist women in both the military and administrative fields, particularly during their leadership in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).

However, we cannot rely on the above as a scientific and objective standard for assessing their effectiveness in decision-making and the practice of their roles in an ideal manner. During our presence in the Autonomous Administration areas, we observed several factors that influence women's status within decision-making circles, either positively or negatively. We will discuss these factors in the following paragraphs.

First: Women's Representation in The Autonomous Administration

The status of women in the regions of North and East Syria takes on a character of organizational structuring where frameworks branch out. Women's involvement in social, political, and economic aspects occurs according to the orientations of the political cover and the sources of financial support for entities or councils concerned with women's affairs. Benefiting from the openness of The Autonomous Administration and its support for women's issues, women's organizations thrive. Some are funded by The Autonomous Administration, while others receive support from external organizations. However, the most impactful and prominent organization within the women's sphere is the "Star Congress." It is responsible for monitoring women's

affairs, ensuring their organization, and representing them on various levels. "Star" is the most organized intellectual women's front within The Autonomous Administration's structure. It also serves as the launching pad for most women to take on administrative, political, societal, and legal roles in the regions of North and East Syria.

The "Star Congress" also acts as a watcher for the effectiveness or decline in women's participation in decision-making. This women's umbrella organization focuses its activities on the intellectual empowerment of volunteers in various fields, such as security, diplomacy, law, education, to nominate them for leadership positions and job appointments.

In accordance with what has been previously explained, and with the implementation of the co-presidency system and the issuance of laws protecting women's rights, the situation of women has gradually improved. Women have started to achieve parity with or even surpass men in terms of representation at various levels of the administrative institutions of the Autonomous Administration. This is evident in Tables (5) and (6), where gender parity is observed in the administration of authorities (executive, legislative, and judicial). The percentage of women in leadership positions within entities increases compared to men. This is due to the existence of an independent women's council (led by a woman). However, on the other hand, women's representation has decreased in the diplomatic sphere in favor of men. This decline has prompted some influential women's organizations in North and East Syria to establish political and diplomatic committees within their organizational frameworks to raise the ceiling of women's diplomatic representation. This is emphasized by the official spokesperson for the Star Congress, Ramziya Mohamad, who states: "In parallel with our announcement of the formation of political and diplomatic committees this year, we are working to develop the organization of women, starting from the commune (the smallest social nucleus) to the canton, providing them with a knowledge base to understand their rights and duties, and refining the knowledge of those involved in the institutions of the Autonomous Administration. We monitor the performance of women in the supreme councils and decide whether they need training or exemption from tasks if they fail to meet the required job performance."

Percentage	High-ranking positions	Year 2020
Equal representation of 50% for both genders.	Executive, Judicial, and Legislative Authorities	
65% representation for women	Institutions (Ministries)	
35% representation for women	Diplomatic Corps	

Table No. (5) Women's Participation in High-Ranking Positions.

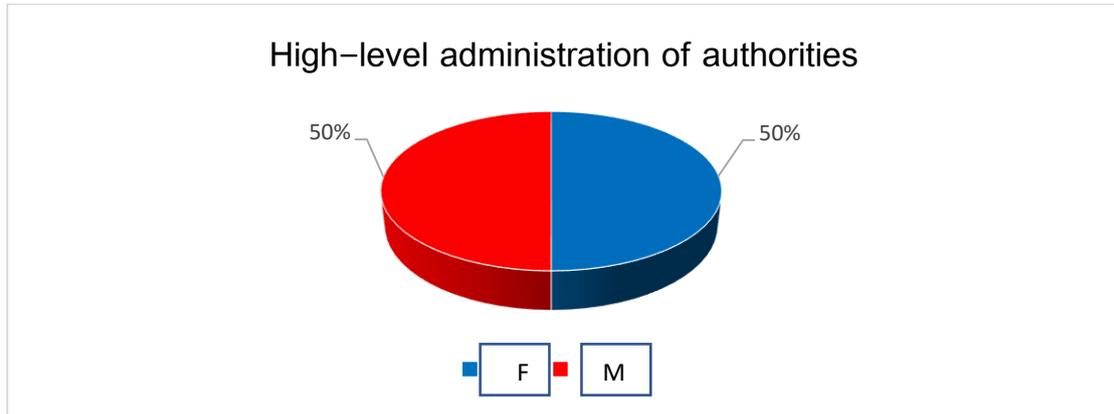


Figure (8)

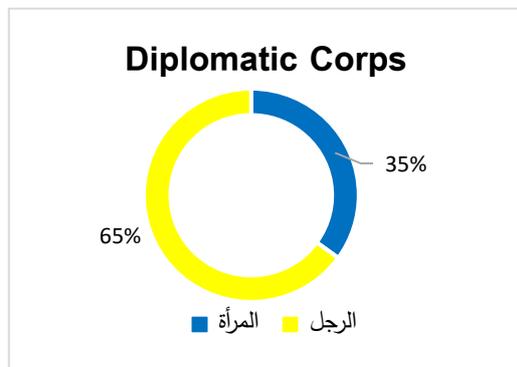


Figure (10)

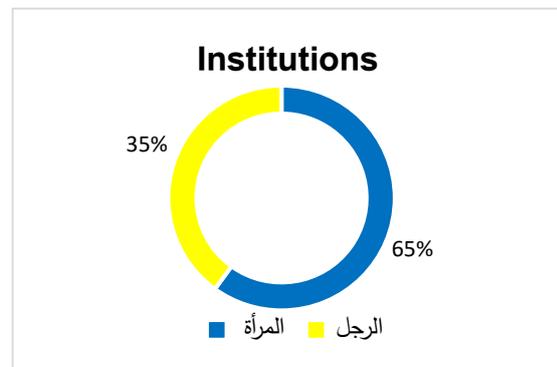


Figure (9)

(Women represented in Blue and Men in Yellow)

The organizational frameworks for women are mostly concentrated in entities such as the Women's Authority, the Women's Coordination, and the councils dedicated to them. Institutions and offices have been established for them, leading to the establishment of the Women's Coordination for North and East Syria, which was included in the

structure of the Autonomous Administration at the beginning of the current year, 4/2/2021, in order to empower women administratively. These offices and councils include women from various nationalities, sects, and Syrian provinces (without a sectarian or ethnic bias, as in Idlib or a national one in Damascus). It is similar to a women's lobby that works according to those involved to ensure the constitutional and political rights of women in Syria and to prevent their issue from being subject to political quotas.

Percentage	Civil jobs	Year
85%	Education jobs	2020
55%	Government jobs	

Figure (6). Women's participation in Civil jobs

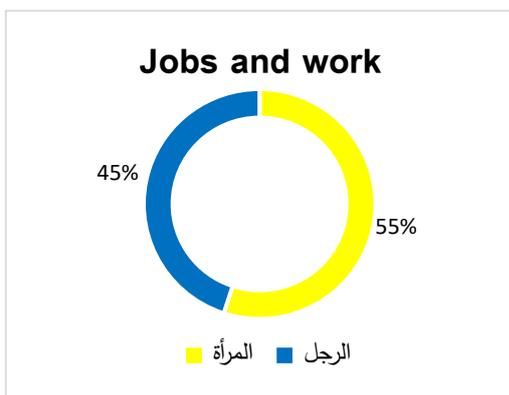


Figure (12)

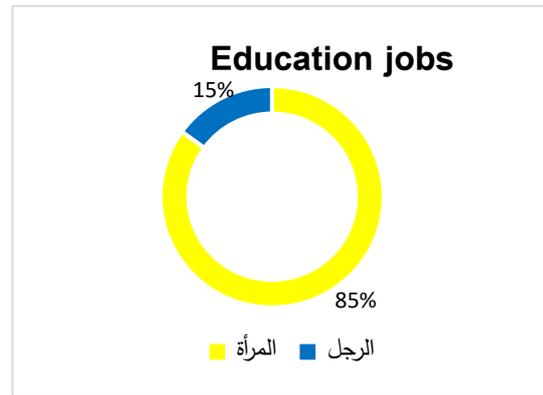


Figure (11)

(Women represented in Yellow and Men in Blue)

Through the previous tables, it becomes clear that the increased participation of women on various levels is primarily a result of a political will in the areas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This will is different from the orientations of other political and party forces in Syria. It is a will, despite stumbling in some places, to convince society of the necessity of respecting women's rights, away from ideological and partisan tendencies. Nevertheless, it is generally more open and flexible compared to the other conflict parties. This is primarily due to its determination to involve women in administration and ensure their rights in work, wages, and

employment on an equal basis with men. Legal and security bodies have been established to monitor the implementation of these legislations.

Secondly: The System of Joint Presidency

The Autonomous Administration announced the implementation of the System of Joint Presidency, which covered the regions of the Autonomous Administration (Afrin, Kobani, and Jazeera) in 2016. This system was applied in all three branches (legislative, judicial, and executive), including institutions, offices, and committees. Initially, representation was based on a 30% women's quota, then increased to 40% (Social Contract), and eventually reached 50% (gender parity).

In reality, the Autonomous Administration believes that the System of Joint Presidency is a unique experiment in building a free and democratic society and the best solution to prevent any party from monopolizing decision-making (eliminating administrative centralization) and ensure women's participation in all aspects of life. However, several obstacles still face the implementation of this newly emerging system.

- Challenges of Implementing the System of Joint Presidency

The experience has revealed several challenges during the implementation of the System of Joint Presidency in the areas of the Autonomous Administration, including:

1. Women's lack of belief in their capabilities.
2. Dominance of the Authoritarian Mentality that Excludes Others
3. The use of quota and consensus rather than qualifications.
4. The fear of physical elimination and social acceptance issues.

1) Women's lack of belief in their capabilities

Despite the conducive environment for women to assume many positions that align with their desire for influence, a significant portion of them still lacks self-initiative and self-confidence in the qualifications required to participate in political life (this factor

is common among women in all Syrian regions). This is due to a combination of intersecting factors, including social, familial, and psychological ones, all of which collectively have adverse effects on a woman's personality, creating an identity in which her will to actively engage in the world of politics and administration is absent.

Legal and human rights expert in the Council of Social Justice **Nufusa Hussu** reflects on her experiences in the Autonomous Administration's institutions, saying: "Men often take the lead in many positions of leadership and decision-making, even though both parties sometimes have equal academic qualifications. As a society, we have not yet overcome the retrogressive mindset and old social traditions. So much so that women suffer from a lack of confidence in their qualifications in the face of men. The problem is not just about the representation ratio but is also the result of many administrators lacking the spirit of self-initiative and a genuine desire to become real decision-makers, and recognizing the importance of their presence for the development of their situation."

2) Dominance of the Authoritarian Mentality that Excludes Others

In the efforts of the Autonomous Administration to create an image of administrative participation, there is a prominent problem stemming from a social legacy based on the non-acceptance of others or the unwillingness to end the rule of centralized power that seeks to control and monopolize authority. As a result of this, women often encounter difficulties to this day in proving their presence due to the male-oriented mentality that obstructs the process of women's participation in political administration and public life.

The joint president of the General Council of the Autonomous Administration, Siham Qaryo, shares her experience with us regarding the discriminatory attitudes she faced while engaging in political work. She says, "In truth, I was among those who weren't convinced of their abilities to succeed in politics due to societal and general perceptions, concepts that suggest that women are not fit for politics, and that the home is the best place for them. I also encountered - as a Syriac woman who was nominated on behalf of the Syriac Women's Union in Syria - many situations that reflected a male-oriented mindset. One of them was during a diplomatic tour of European countries, where someone contacted me and advised me not to participate in this field because it would

cause trouble for me and my family. However, I continued with my tasks and my confidence in my abilities to achieve positive results grew."

In this regard, some of the women we have spoken to believe that the male-dominated society does not spare women and often accuses them unfairly of lacking competence, which keeps them away from decision-making circles. According to the description of some, this retrogressive mindset is a result of a lack of awareness, a decline in the culture of respecting others, a love for holding onto power, and the insistence on keeping women as mere followers who execute orders. However, some believe that in areas with a Kurdish majority, this mindset has been gradually changing, and many men are now advocating for women's issues in meetings and gatherings. This, according to them, is a promising sign, but it will take more time for the idea that gender-inclusive decision-making is essential for societal reform to be widely accepted and to avoid the structural problems that currently divide it.

3) The use of quota and consensus rather than qualifications

Although the system of joint presidency can be considered one of the proposed solutions to make decisions collectively through discussion, exchange of views, and reducing the dominance of one gender in decision-making, in reality, it is subject in one way or another to a form of sectarianism or consociationalism. In this approach, the involvement of certain ethnicities, sects, or parties often takes precedence over academic qualifications. This can be observed in the bodies and councils of the Autonomous Administration, where women, in many cases, lack the necessary academic qualifications or administrative competence required. The basis of selection in a large part lies in the woman's affiliation with a particular sect, ethnicity, or region. Some observers consider this approach as a way to portray that "the Autonomous Administration supports women's issues and includes all social components and political blocs." However, this issue doesn't only concern women but also affects men. There is a broad segment of leaders and influential figures who lack qualifications, academic degrees, and administrative and leadership skills, yet they are nominated for leadership positions in political, civil, and military structures. Meanwhile, many individuals, both men and women, who possess the required qualifications in areas of

the Autonomous Administration are excluded or marginalized from holding positions, forcing many of them to emigrate abroad. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of consociationalism is highly concerning as it primarily has a negative impact on the performance and image of women in leadership positions.

4) The fear of physical elimination and social acceptance issues

The Autonomous Administration governs various areas with diverse population compositions (ethnic and religious), making it the most geographically diverse region in Syria. This diversity has posed significant challenges to the implementation of the system of shared governance. For example, there is good social acceptance of this administrative system in the Jazira region (as defined by the Autonomous Administration). However, in other areas recently taken over by the Syrian Democratic Forces (a military alliance composed of regional components), such as the northern and eastern countryside of Deir EzZor and the Raqqa region, the acceptance of the idea remains weak. Despite improvements, the women's participation rates in these areas are still lower compared to the rest of the Autonomous Administration. According to Jiyan Khedro, the head of the Women's Authority for North and East Syria, these areas suffer from the dominance of rigid customs and traditions and an extremist mentality that was implanted by ISIS in these regions. ISIS imposed bleak lifestyles in which women were deprived of their basic rights.

As a result, women find themselves caught between society's reluctance to accept their presence alongside men in decision-making and administrative roles, considering that this form of governance tarnishes the family and tribal reputation and violates religious teachings and their familial duties. On the other hand, they also fear violence and physical elimination due to the activity of ISIS cells, as seen in the gruesome incident targeting two local officials in the town of Tal al-Shayir, south of Hasakah on January 24 of this year. Consequently, many women, much like in opposition-held areas, refrain from engaging in political life out of fear of shame as a stereotypical view or inevitable death.

Third: Women's Independence in the Administration

The objective aspects of women's political participation become clear only through an analysis of the degree of independence required, which must be supported by democratic structures that enhance participation and social justice. Here are the aspects of women's independence in the areas of the Autonomous Administration:

1) Political Independence

Women's organizations have a strong will to achieve development goals and provide the functional foundations for granting women political independence. This independence enables them to overcome the obstacles that inhibit women from competing with men and defending their rights and the issues of their society. This is accomplished through the dissemination of awareness and culture, as well as the establishment of a political culture that is part of societal culture. This was confirmed to us by the spokesperson for the Star Congress, **Razmiyya Muhammad**. She pointed out that within their women's entity, they have established a special committee for politics this year. Its mission is to expand women's activity in the diplomatic and political field, thereby enhancing the capacities and qualifications of women to promote their roles and increase their political participation according to legal and constitutional principles. This is an introduction to granting women greater independence in decision-making, administration, and leadership, improving their political performance, and benefiting from the new political and intellectual academies to promote political values. This is being done through the establishment of committees and independent counsels for women within most of the political parties affiliated with the Autonomous Administration, even if it is not yet effective at the required level.

2) Economic Independence

Unlike the areas under government and opposition control, the law on labor and women's protection in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) upholds women's economic independence and equality with men in work and wages. It allows women to choose the profession they desire and protects their rights.

This is complemented by a surge in projects and plans aimed at empowering women and giving them greater economic independence. This is achieved through organizing training workshops and development programs that recognize the financial aspect's impact on women's decision-making and independence. Financial independence translates into decision-making autonomy and liberation from societal pressures.

Therefore, most agricultural and industrial development projects are managed by the Star Congress or some other women's organizations. **Ghalya Najjar**, an administrator in the Women's Economic Committee of the Star Congress, shares her economic experience, stating, "One of our most important roles at present is to restore women to their vital place as participants in building society's economy and development. We focus on spreading values that encourage collaboration and reject individual exploitation of resources. We also base our work on the relationship between politics and economics, as economic independence for women means freeing them from constraints and barriers to their active participation in politics."

The Union of Associations in Northern Syria is one of the Women's Economic Committee's most significant achievements, alongside agricultural projects (Greenhouses), opening bakeries, restaurants, sewing workshops, clothing stores, and the establishment of factories for preserves and detergents, as well as supermarkets for food and vegetables. These projects have been able to provide services to a significant percentage of women who have lost family breadwinners or have been displaced from conflict areas, offering employment opportunities for some of the female workforce.

The program lists and the women-focused economic projects summarize the challenges they faced, given the novelty of the experience, the fragility of proper care and planning, the weakness of the female staff's experience responsible for managing such projects, in addition to the lack of security stability, and therefore the absence of the local investment climate due to repeated Turkish attacks on the areas of the Autonomous Administration. The spread of the coronavirus also had a significant impact on stopping most economic and developmental activities.

In any case, the experience of women's cooperatives in the fields of agriculture and animal husbandry is considered one of the most important forms of women's solidarity, and it is a unique initiative despite its need for an investment climate and time to achieve the desired success.

Fourth: Women in the Laws of the Autonomous Administration

The "Women's Law" applied in the areas of the Autonomous Administration since 2014 aligns with international agreements related to women, such as CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Istanbul Convention on Combating Domestic Violence. This law takes a civil approach, in contrast to Syrian law which is based on Islamic Sharia and the Hanafi jurisprudence. There is a difference between the Syrian constitution and the social contract in the Autonomous Administration. The social contract grants women citizenship for their children and the right to equal inheritance. It also addresses issues related to alimony, custody, abolishing the dowry, polygamy, and grants women political, economic, and social rights, as well as participation in the military aspect.

The law stipulates "full equality between men and women in all areas of public and private life," as clarified by Nufusa Husso, a legal expert in the Council of Social Justice. This encompasses political and economic rights, including:

1. Political Rights: Ensuring equality between men and women in all aspects of life, such as the right to vote, run for office, hold public positions, and perform duties in various administrative roles. This is based on the principle of participation in all institutions and the promotion of their role in organizations and non-governmental associations. Women's organizations and human rights have the right to monitor the discussion of laws specific to women issued in exceptional cases by the legislative council. Women have the right to represent the administration at the international level and conduct negotiations without discrimination.

2. Economic Rights: Ensuring equality between women and men in the right to work and wages in accordance with labor law in the Autonomous Administration. Women

have financial independence and the right to choose the profession they desire. Their rights are guaranteed upon reaching the retirement age.

As the Syrian law, which is still in effect in the areas of the Autonomous Administration alongside the Administration's law, leads to a state of legal duplicity that creates a situation of chaos as described by **Media Hassan** (a lawyer working in state courts and with experience in the councils of the Autonomous Administration). She commented on the matter, saying, 'The reality is dominated by a state of contradiction and conflict between the laws of the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration. The former still has many of its legislations, especially those related to women's affairs, based on Islamic jurisprudence, and does not keep up with the requirements of the current situation. Meanwhile, the latter enjoys, to some extent, objectivity and logic. Still, the gaps must be filled by subjecting it to the necessary amendments to make it more comprehensive and in line with the customs and traditions of society. Furthermore, the mechanisms for implementing legislation should be characterized by efficiency and legal expertise, away from any form of bias or laxity in law enforcement. Ultimately, we need consensus and agreement between the government and the administration to enact common laws that respect women's rights first and align with the needs of society.'

On the other hand, Ster Qasim (Chair of the Peace Leaders Network, Member of the Coordination Committee of the Women's Council in North and East Syria for Civil Society Organizations), finds that women's participation in the areas of the Autonomous Administration is distinctive on the level of Syria. She considers that the availability of security and laws that protect women has given them a significant role on various levels (social, political, economic, and cultural)."

Fifth: Women in Educational Curricula

The Autonomous Administration has established educational and cultural institutions parallel to those belonging to the Syrian government in the areas of North and East Syria. These areas have suffered from decades of marginalization, imbalances, and

setbacks in education at various technical, administrative, scientific, and logistical levels.

In general, the curricula of the Autonomous Administration reasonably consider the nature of the communities, their ethnic, religious, and cultural composition, and are more open to societal issues, particularly women's issues and their natural roles in societies when compared to curricula taught in government-controlled and opposition-held areas. These curricula prepare individuals in the early stages of education to challenge traditional ideas rooted in social norms.

However, the content of the Arabic curricula differs from those prepared in the Kurdish language. Through an analysis of reading, social studies, and history lessons, women in the Kurdish curricula are portrayed as fighters or vital foundations for the progress of history, society, and the establishment of democracy. The representation of women in this curriculum can be seen as breaking away from traditional and stereotypical roles for women. Furthermore, the educational system introduces a material called "Jinology - Women's Studies" and establishes a department for it in institutes and universities within the College of Languages and Social Sciences. In the book "Sociology of Freedom" by the prominent Kurdish thinker and politician Abdullah Ocalan, this field of study delves into issues related to countering gender bias, underestimation of women's values, and their social status. It also highlights women's roles across the ages in building the maternal social system, establishing peace, justice, communal living, and developing the social economy.

Part Three
Results and Recommendations

Results:

The researcher arrived at a series of results, through which it becomes clear that there is a difference in the approach of the governing powers in Syria's areas of influence regarding women's representation and their participation in political life. Here is a summary of the study's results:

1. The representation of women in political life within the Autonomous Administration areas is higher, and women are on equal footing with or even surpass men in many positions. This is in contrast to areas controlled by the regime and opposition, where women's representation is lower, often below 12%, and sometimes completely absent, as in the case of the Salvation Government areas.
2. The Autonomous Administration relies on a system of shared presidency in managing its institutions, whereas the government and opposition follow a different system based on individual representation or inactive formal quotas.
3. Women's representation within the regime and opposition is done on an individual basis, without women's blocs, whereas in the Autonomous Administration areas, representation can be either individual or through nominations by women's blocks and councils.
4. The Syrian regime tops the list in terms of women politicians with academic qualifications, followed by opposition-controlled areas, and then the Autonomous Administration.
5. Women's representation in the Autonomous Administration, opposition, and regime is built on a form of political power-sharing and consensus-building. However, this has led to the exclusion and marginalization of strong and capable women who could have a political impact.
6. Women's participation in the Autonomous Administration areas is effective and influential compared to their roles in the Syrian government and opposition.

7. Societal constraints that hinder women's political work are still prevalent in all three areas of influence, although they have a weaker impact in the north and east of the country due to the laws.

8. The legal provisions for women's equality in the constitutions and legislation of the regime and opposition are weak and have taken on a religious character (with varying degrees of conservatism depending on the region), in contrast to the civil nature of the Autonomous Administration's laws.

9- The weakness or absence of regulations governing political life, especially those related to issuing laws for party licensing in opposition and regime -controlled areas.

10- Women continue to be constrained by restrictions and security pressures, deterring them from engaging in political work, especially in opposition and regime areas, as well as in some pockets where ISIS is active within the Autonomous Administration regions.

11- A wide segment of women struggles with a lack of confidence in their ability to effect change and engage politically.

12- The stereotypical negative image of women is still being exported through educational and pedagogical curricula in regime and opposition areas, while more importance is given to women's liberation issues and their societal and revolutionary role in the Autonomous Administration curricula.

13- Incidents of violence against women persist in the three areas of influence, with the most severe cases occurring in opposition areas and the least in Autonomous Administration areas.

14- Regime and opposition areas have not witnessed the establishment of economic projects and development plans that would grant financial independence to women, while the Autonomous Administration has activated women's economic councils responsible for supporting women's economic projects.

15- The weakness of political, legal, and economic empowerment projects and programs for women in regime and opposition areas, and their resurgence in Autonomous Administration areas.

16- Civil society organizations play a marginal role in the administrative qualification and development of women's personalities, focusing more on developing professional aspects that serve the labor market.

Recommendations:

The researcher has come up with a set of recommendations that can contribute to activating women's participation in political life. However, it remains contingent on the existence of a democratic government that respects women's rights. These recommendations can be summarized as follows:

1. Women should realize that their political participation is a guarantee for other freedoms on all levels.
2. Efforts should be made to increase women's representation in political life through legal guarantees. Women's quotas should not be less than 30%, with a gradual increase towards parity.
3. It is necessary to establish criteria and guidelines for the selection of women who will hold positions to ensure fair and objective representation of all segments of society. Selection should be based on educational qualifications and administrative competence rather than affiliation with specific social groups or political parties.
4. Review the internal regulations of many political parties and structures and promote gender inclusivity in everything they issue and implement.
5. Enact regulations governing political parties and political life to liberate opposition political parties or civil organizations, especially women's organizations, from the monopoly of dominant powers, thereby achieving democratic political reform.
6. Create a law to protect women from all forms of violence directed against them. The law should include a political provision that aligns with international standards.
7. Document and record women's experiences and share them to serve as a source of inspiration and emulation for other women.
8. Ensure women's participation in decision-making centers, away from quotas and political wrangling.

9. Support empowerment programs and projects (political, economic, social, legal, and institutional) for women to raise their awareness of their rights and strengthen their self-esteem, enabling them to participate in political entities.

10. Ensure women's rights in the Syrian constitution and activate monitoring and accountability systems for any discriminatory actions against women, especially those working in the political field. Take measures to protect them from pressure, threats, and extortion.

11- Utilizing the expertise of specialists in gender issues to avoid constitutional, cultural, and economic challenges that hinder women's participation as independent entities in various fields.

12- Respecting the parties to the conflict for international conventions and covenants protecting women's rights, amending discriminatory legislation that contradicts international norms.

13- Promoting a culture of human rights in societies and considering the respect for women's rights an integral part of it.

14- Providing governmental and administrative support (morally, financially) for women's engagement in political life, while avoiding women's dependence on men, which leads to subordination.

15- Achieving social justice, with influential forces recognizing the importance of challenging negative prevailing practices (religiously, socially, and in the media) that violate women's dignity and rights.

16- Establishing communication between women's organizations and human rights organizations, especially international ones, to form a women's lobby that pressures decision-makers.

17- Giving international donor agencies importance to women's political participation when providing support and grants to civil society organizations and political institutions, making advocacy for women's issues a priority in any political movement.

18- Activating women's alliances and coalitions within councils and bodies to protect their voices, support their rights, create a common ground to enhance their performance, and build common visions with similar blocs, developing mechanisms for women's solidarity to take unified, stronger stances against improper practices against them.

19- Reviewing the portrayal of women in educational curricula and dedicating specific subjects to women's and children's rights, encouraging respect for the freedom and rights of every individual.

20- Allocating balanced media spaces for both genders, launching awareness campaigns on women's issues, highlighting the dangers of their marginalization and violence against them, and dispelling the stereotypical image of women that perpetuates an inaccurate view of their reality and roles in public life.

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Appendix:

In this appendix, we will present the most prominent figures with whom research interviews were conducted or whose televised and research interviews were utilized in service of the current study:

Research Interviews

Personal interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 30 individuals from various specializations and professions (administrative, political, legal, civil, economic, educational, and media). Some of them chose to remain anonymous due to personal or security reasons. The following are some of the field figures included in the study:

- Arouba Mahfoud (Member of the Syrian People's Assembly); communication was through Messenger.
- Nora Arissian (Member of the Syrian People's Assembly); communication was through Messenger.
- Huda Sarjawi (Lawyer and Legal Activist); communication was through Messenger.
- Ghalya Al-Rahal (Head of the Women's Office, Mazaya Women's Organization for Women's Empowerment); communication was through WhatsApp.
- Dima Moussa (Member of the Syrian National Coalition); her testimony was quoted from the Second Conference of Syrian Women's Political Movement [[link](#)].
- Khawla Dinya (Director of the Syrian Women's Network in Gaziantep, Turkey); a research interview was presented in the study titled "Women's Participation in Peace, Security, and Transitional Processes in the Arab World" [[link](#)].
- Ramziya Mohammed (Official Spokesperson for the Star Congress - Women's Union); interviewed in the field in Qamishli.
- Nafusa Husso (Legal and Human Rights expert in the Social Justice Council); communication was through WhatsApp.
- Sihem Qariu (Co-Chair of the General Council for the Autonomous Administration); communication was via phone.
- Jehan Khedro (Head of the Women's Authority); communication was via phone.
- Amal Shamdin (Administrator in the Women's Office of the Syria Democratic Council); interviewed in the field in Qamishli.

- Ghalya Al-Najjar (Administration in the Women's Economy Committee); communication was through WhatsApp.
- Media Hassan (Lawyer and Legal Expert); interviewed in the field in Qamishli.
- Ster Qasim (Chair of the Peace Leaders Network, Member of the Coordination Committee of the Women's Council in North and East Syria from Civil Society Organizations); communication was through WhatsApp.



Thank you to everyone who contributed to the study



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