

From Politics to Economic Reconstruction



Report on Women's Participation
in the Future of Syria



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Introduction

Over the course of four dialogue sessions held in June 2025, and within the framework of a project funded by the European Union and implemented by Kvinna till Kvinna in partnership with Dawlaty, Syrian women experts and activists from diverse fields discussed the reality of women's participation in Syria's political and economic future.

The first session, titled **“The Role of Unions and Political Parties in Syria's Future – Strengthening Participation, Ensuring Inclusion,”** took place on June 2025 ,4.

The second session addressed **“Advancing Women's Political Participation in Syria: Insights from Recent Research,”** and was held on June 2025 ,13.

This was followed by the third session, **“Lessons from a Decade of Women's Economic Empowerment Initiatives: Successes, Challenges, and the Way Forward,”** held on June 2025 ,17.

The final session focused on **“Women's Economic Engagement in Reconstruction: Entrepreneurship and Opportunities for Growth”** and took place on June ,18 2025.

These sessions aimed to provide an in-depth critical reading of current practices, challenges, opportunities, and proposed pathways to ensure the inclusion of women during the phases of transition, recovery, and reconstruction. The sessions were moderated by Mariam Abu Samra and addressed issues related to unions, political parties, local councils, informal political participation, economic empowerment, urban reconstruction, the circular economy, and gender-responsive financial planning.

The dialogues brought together politicians, activists, and experts, including Malak Touma, Dr. Rula Baghdadi, Aisha Ibrahim, Ghenwa Al-Shoumary, Alice Moufarrej, Hsnaa Brkat, Thuraya Hejazi, Ghada Rifai, and Nathalie Khoury. This report seeks to consolidate the outcomes of the four sessions into a single comprehensive document that takes into account all details, quotes, and proposed strategies.

(For more information about the speakers, please refer to the end of the document.)

Women's Political Participation in Syria: Toward Substantive Rather Than Symbolic Representation

Amid the profound transformations Syria is undergoing, the question of women's political participation remains a central issue in the discussions of feminist actors, particularly in the context of dismantling deeply rooted exclusionary structures and rebuilding a more just and inclusive political system.

In this context, it was emphasized that the debate does not revolve around partisan affiliations or political alignments, but rather around the need to broaden the scope of participation, especially for women, in decision-making positions, based on respect for diversity and appreciation of dialogue and shared experiences. Some participants also stressed the importance of moving beyond closed identity-based discourse and seeking common feminist ground that transcends political and regional divisions.

The Legacy of Repression and Mechanisms of Exclusion

Journalist and activist Malak Touma presented a critical feminist reading of the political landscape in Syria, arguing that the collapse of the traditional system did not lead to the dismantling of a culture of exclusion. Instead, she exposed the deep entrenchment of the **“legacy of repression,”** manifested in institutional patriarchy, symbolic representation, and conservative traditions that hinder women’s integration into public life. She noted that exclusion does not always operate through direct mechanisms, but rather seeps into everyday details, such as men’s dominance over political meetings and the exclusion of women from closed networks, leading to women’s voluntary withdrawal and the reinforcement of the patriarchal system.

In this context, one participant pointed out that these **“soft”** forms of exclusion are more dangerous than explicit exclusion, as they are practiced under the guise of customs or **“social propriety,”** causing women themselves to doubt their right to be present and to make demands.

According to Malak, genuine women’s participation cannot be achieved unless women are partners in the founding of unions and political parties from the outset, with the adoption of inclusive internal regulations and clear quotas, in addition to building feminist alliances that transcend political and generational divisions.

She argued that criticism alone is insufficient; rather, realistic alternatives must be proposed that lead to genuine reform in power structures, so that women’s participation becomes a pillar of political legitimacy rather than mere symbolic ornamentation. One of the contributors supported this argument by emphasizing that **“symbolic inclusion at the institutional level”** is not only ineffective, but also harmful to the feminist cause, as it creates an illusion of representation without real power.

The Absence of Real Influence Despite Formal Representation

For her part, Dr. Rula Baghdadi shed light on the limited nature of women’s participation in positions of influence, arguing that superficial changes in the political system have not affected its centralist and patriarchal core. Unions and political parties, she noted, are not independent entities, but are often subject to intelligence agencies and used as tools of surveillance rather than representation.

Despite women’s presence in some advisory committees, their influence remains almost non-existent. Women’s representation is often part of donor-driven promotional campaigns rather than stemming from a genuine conviction

in the necessity of empowerment. Dr. Baghdadi cited the experience of Rwanda as an inspiring example, where cohesive feminist organizing in the aftermath of the genocide enabled women to secure half of the parliamentary seats, highlighting the importance of political will and comprehensive planning.

One participant from Raqqa commented on Rula's remarks, noting that women's representation in her area, even when it exists, is often subject to monitoring by the local community and accountability to tribal structures or the local authority, which strips it of independence. Another participant from Deir ez-Zor shared a personal experience in which she was forced to decline a local position due to security harassment, stressing that **"these fears are not theoretical; they affect our daily lives."**

Rula called for immediate action despite the security and social risks, through the building of political pressure networks, the production of research, and the establishment of an environment capable of protecting women from harassment and violence, whether in public or virtual spaces, particularly in marginalized areas. Several participants also emphasized the importance of establishing a feminist observatory to monitor violations against women activists, as a step toward protection and accountability.



Intersection of Research and Fieldwork

In the second session, Aisha Ibrahim presented the findings of a national study conducted by Dawlaty in 2024 in five Syrian regions (Idlib, Suwayda, Damascus, Raqqa, and Aleppo), which revealed a stark gap in women's representation in local councils. Participation stood at 12% in areas under the former Syrian regime's control and was entirely absent in the northwest, while it reached 50% in areas under Autonomous Administration, where it nevertheless often remained symbolic. She noted that existing laws, despite their presence, are not effectively implemented and are **"gender-blind,"** lacking accompanying accountability mechanisms.

An activist from Idlib shared a striking experience, explaining that women who attempted to run for local councils received direct threats from armed groups, prompting some to withdraw at the last moment.

Aisha recommended reforming electoral laws, enforcing binding quotas, and launching awareness campaigns targeting society as a whole, while engaging men as allies rather than adversaries. A participant from Suwayda added that **"not all men are against us, but many are not trained to see women as political partners, and this requires a collective effort."**

Ghenwa Al-Shoumary focused on the alternative political roles women play outside formal positions of power.

In her view, political struggle begins at home and extends through the local community and grassroots initiatives. While there are more than 1,000 active civil society organizations in Syria, only 8% focus on women's issues, reflecting the need for intersectional feminist strategies that support women in rural and marginalized areas.

Activists from Quneitra and Al-Bukamal engaged with this perspective, affirming that political action does not begin in parliament, but at the grassroots level: in the kitchen, the school, the street, and every space in which women engage in resisting silence and marginalization.

Participation in Constitution-Making

Alice Moufarrej, who previously participated in the constitutional negotiation process, offered a critical perspective on the path of formal women's representation, noting that women's participation did not exceed 6% in the first round. She criticized appointment mechanisms that prioritize loyalty and affiliation over competence, warning that marginalization would be reproduced in new forms if women are not genuinely involved in drafting the constitution.

This discussion prompted strong reactions from several participants, who expressed concern that the forthcoming constitution could turn into a **“patriarchal deal”** that neither reflects women’s struggles nor their aspirations, but instead entrenches exclusion in a more **“democratic”** guise.

Alice called for the establishment of an independent women’s council to serve as an influential voice in any future political process, alongside the need for radical reform of nationality laws, political party laws, and educational curricula.

From Analysis to Action

The sessions were marked by rich engagement among participants, including questions about the relationship between everyday struggle and formal political work, and the role of media and education in dismantling patriarchal culture. Ideas were also raised about drawing on the experiences of Gulf countries that have adopted gradual reform based on economic and political stability. Calls emerged to expand coordination from the grassroots level rather than relying solely on elites, and to ensure that every region has its own voice and representation in any negotiation process.

In closing, the speakers unanimously agreed that symbolic representation is insufficient, and that political participation is not a luxury but a necessity during periods of transition. Democracy is not granted; it is built, and women must be at the heart of this process, as decision-makers rather than mere decorative figures.



Women's Economic Empowerment in Syria: **From Relief to Building a Just Feminist Economy**

The third and fourth sessions in the seminar series provided an in-depth space to discuss the future of women's economic empowerment in Syria through a shift from emergency relief support toward building fair and sustainable economic models, and linking this to reconstruction processes from a feminist perspective that places justice and participation at the heart of planning and policymaking.

From Relief to a Feminist Economy

Hsnaa Brkat, a researcher and the project manager of **“From Relief to a Feminist Economy”** at Syrian Feminist Society, presented the results of a qualitative study that clearly revealed the limited impact of most economic projects targeting women. She explained that the majority of these initiatives are short-term and lack a structural dimension, as they are often confined to livelihood activities delivered by international organizations through local partners.

Brkat noted that women are pushed into unproductive or highly precarious sectors such as small crafts and sewing, while high-profit sectors and those associated with economic influence remain largely reserved for men.

She emphasized that the issue is not poverty alone, but rather the absence of sound planning, capturing this in her remark: **“I trained four women in a village of ten thousand people, without asking: do they even have a market?”**

She also stressed the need to hold donors accountable for funding conditions and, to channel funding toward initiatives with sustainable impact, promote cooperative and solidarity-based economies, prioritize women in rural and marginalized areas, and build accurate databases that reflect women’s real needs.

Linking Economic Empowerment to the Political Context

Thuraya Hejazi, a development consultant and researcher in gender economics, offered an analytical reading of economic intervention experiences in northern Syria, focusing on the importance of linking economic empowerment to the political and social context. She explained that many initiatives treat empowerment as a neutral technical tool, overlooking the fact that the economy is closely tied to power structures.

Hejazi noted that empowering women requires questioning prevailing laws, governance systems, and social contracts, and breaking the silence around economic violations against women, such as depriving them of inheritance or fair wages. She added a stark example: **“Men used their wives to access aid. The woman received the training, but the man is the one who decides whether she will work. This is not individual injustice; it is systematic.”**

On Justice and Entrepreneurship

During the discussion, participants raised fundamental questions about the difference between economic entrepreneurship and economic justice, and about how to balance individual-level empowerment with strengthening collective empowerment grounded in solidarity. The impact of displacement and economic collapse on women's priorities was also discussed, as well as the need to hold international actors accountable for their role in reproducing economic vulnerability.

Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning

Ghada Rifai, an urban planner and co-founder of the Mobaderoon Network, presented an analytical approach to urban planning based on women's field experiences. She explained that women were at the forefront of reconstruction from the very first moment, without waiting for external interventions: they took the initiative to repair homes, organize public spaces, and develop self-support mechanisms.



Rifai stressed that participatory urban planning, grounded in involving the local community, and especially women, can serve as a fair and equitable alternative to exclusionary technocratic policies. She emphasized that planning is not neutral, but determines who has the right to housing, mobility, and work, stating: **“Every line we draw on the map creates inclusion or exclusion.”**

Beyond Individual Entrepreneurship

Thuraya Hejazi reiterated that individual entrepreneurship alone is not sufficient to achieve economic empowerment, particularly in the context of property and legal structures that restrict women's independence. Men control land ownership, set contractual conditions, and determine distribution and financing decisions.

Hejazi called for building collective economic models that strengthen justice and participation, and for recognizing unpaid care work as part of the formal economy and integrating it into policies and national plans. She also emphasized the need to reform inheritance laws to ensure justice, enact comprehensive legal protection for women workers in the informal sector, and have the state invest in care services as part of economic infrastructure.

The Circular Economy as an Alternative Model

Nathalie Khoury, an economic consultant specializing in circular economy, provided a detailed explanation of this model, noting that women have long practiced sustainability approaches such as recycling, producing from waste, and local production, yet these practices are often overlooked in official economic policies.

Khoury stressed that the circular economy is not limited to environmental protection; it also opens the way to building local economic models that reduce waste and strengthen community-based production. She called for financial and structural support for this effort through the establishment of specialized business incubators, the launch of women-targeted green financing programs, and the provision of incentives for local innovation and sustainable practices. She emphasized that the absence of shared platforms, whether digital, financial, or political,

reduces women's innovations to isolated stories rather than enabling them to become an influential economic force.

Reconstruction as an Opportunity for Economic Justice

The session featured an in-depth discussion on the intersection between reconstruction and gender justice. Participants raised questions about who holds the right to make urban planning decisions, and how to ensure that future cities are responsive to women's needs.

There was broad consensus that reconstruction is not merely a material process, but an opportunity to reconfigure economic and social structures in ways that place women at the center of planning, leadership, and sustainability. It was also emphasized that genuine economic empowerment must be redefined as a comprehensive liberation project, rather than a set of technical tools or temporary initiatives.

Conclusion

The discussions held during the four seminars reveal that the future of women in Syria cannot be reduced to a separate political or economic trajectory, but is instead shaped by a deep interconnection between the two. Political participation is not limited to representation in institutions or constitution-making processes, but also encompasses women's ability to shape economic and social policies that directly affect their daily lives. Conversely, economic empowerment is not confined to job creation or support for small enterprises, but requires a political and legislative environment that ensures justice, protects rights, and opens space for accountability and genuine participation.



The interventions and field-based experiences highlighted that any sustainable reform must move beyond emergency responses and toward building inclusive structures and systems that address the root causes of marginalization and inequality. Syrian women, whether in the political sphere or the economic domain, face systems of structural constraints, ranging from laws and procedures to prevailing social norms, making their liberation inseparable from broader societal transformation.

Linking political action with economic action, from a feminist and emancipatory perspective, is what enables women to shape their futures independently and on equal footing, and turns reconstruction into a historic opportunity to rebuild Syria on the foundations of justice, participation, and equality among all its citizens – women and men alike.

Recommendations for Political Empowerment and Effective Women's Participation

- Comprehensive constitutional reform, including nationality laws, political party laws, and educational curricula;
- Reform of electoral laws to ensure equal opportunities and the enforcement of quota systems to guarantee minimum representation;
- Involving women in drafting political party and union laws from the outset, and instituting binding gender quotas within parties to ensure substantive representation;
- Establishing feminist networks that transcend political and geographical divisions;
- Adopting strategic plans that strengthen confidence in women's leadership capacities;
- Supporting political training and capacity-building for women in rural and marginalized areas beyond major urban centers;
- Building partnerships with international organizations to advance structural reforms that ensure gender representation;
- Launching community awareness campaigns on the importance of women's participation;
- Working to engage men as allies in the process of change;
- Developing intersectional feminist strategies that recognize the diversity of women's experiences;
- Establishing an independent women's council to serve as an effective voice for women in the political process.

Recommendations for Economic Empowerment and Effective Women's Participation

- Holding donors accountable for funding conditions and directing resources toward initiatives with sustainable impact;
- Supporting cooperative and solidarity-based economies;
- Prioritizing women in rural and marginalized areas;
- Building data systems that reflect women's real needs;
- Creating women-led feminist spaces for designing economic policies;
- Integrating a gender perspective into local financial planning;
- Redefining the concept of labor to include care and unpaid work;
- Advocating for laws that protect women's economic independence;
- Reforming inheritance laws to ensure justice for women;
- Enacting comprehensive legal protection for women workers, particularly in the informal sector;
- Investing state resources in care services as part of economic infrastructure;
- Establishing business incubators specialized in the circular economy;
- Launching green financing programs targeting women;
- Providing incentives for local innovation and sustainable practices.

About the Participating Experts

Malak Touma: Holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations from Mardin Artuklu University. She is a trainer and journalist writing on peacebuilding and women's political participation. She previously served as Vice President of the Syrian Community in Gaziantep. Touma is the founder and director of the Right to Write initiative, which focuses on women's autobiographical writing and oral history. She is also a member of the Political Bureau of the Syrian National Movement.

Dr. Rula Baghdadi: Holds a PhD in Constitutional Law and is a researcher specializing in transitional justice. She is a human rights lawyer and an advocate for political detainees in Syria. Dr. Baghdadi is the Executive Director of Dawlaty, an organization that primarily focuses on transitional justice, supporting associations of families of victims of detention and enforced disappearance, and promoting women's political participation.

Aisha Ibrahim: A civil activist and women's rights defender since 2013. She is currently a third-year Business Administration student at Gaziantep University. Since 2018, she has served as Program Manager for Women's Political Participation and Transitional Justice at Dawlaty. She has been a trainer since 2017 on women's political participation, gender-based violence, mobilization and advocacy, and life skills. Ibrahim co-founded several civil several

civil initiatives in western rural Aleppo, including the Hawwa Association and the Syrian Women's Assembly, and was among the founders of the first women's team in western rural Aleppo, «Kirmalek» (For You), in 2013.

Ghenwa Al-Shoumary: A researcher on Syrian affairs and a PhD candidate in International Relations at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. She is a member of the Syrian Women's Political Movement and works as a campaign and advocacy consultant with several Syrian and international organizations.

Alice Moufarrej: A former Arabic language teacher and a former member of the Syrian Negotiation Commission for the UN-sponsored political process. She previously served as Deputy Head of the delegation of the High Negotiations Committee and as a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. Moufarrej also previously headed the detainees and missing persons file within the Negotiation Commission and served as its Gender Coordinator for the political process. She is a founding member of the Syrian Feminist Political Movement and leads its feminist political track. She is also a founding member of the Syrian Women's Network and a co-founder of Duderi (registered in Berlin), where she serves as Programs Director. She has authored numerous published and unpublished papers on Syria's political transition from a feminist perspective and is a former political detainee.

Hsnaa Brkat: A civil activist and Executive Director of Syrian Feminist Society operating in Atareb, Idlib Governorate, and Aleppo. She studied economics and holds a diploma in governance and conflict resolution, and is preparing to begin postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Economics. She has ten years of experience in project management with various local and international organizations in northwest Syria. Brkat is also a specialized trainer in initiative and project management, with over 3,000 hours of training experience.

Thuraya Hejazi: Holds an MSA in Economics and an MSA in Financial Management from the Arab Academy of Financial and Banking Science. She works as an economic consultant and has publications in political and feminist political economy. Hejazi is the director of Release Me, an organization working with women survivors of violence. She is also a trainer on an economic empowerment program focused on building financial literacy, which she designed specifically for women with limited formal education.

Nathalie Khoury: A business consultant specialized in circular economy and sustainability. She previously served as advisor to the Lebanese Minister of Industry and is the current advisor to the Association of Bekaa Industrialists. An environmentalist at heart, she is committed to community development and social justice. After a career in sales and marketing, she transitioned to sustainability in 2021, collaborating with national initiatives to promote sustainable waste management. Since 2022, she has designed and implemented projects enabling the transition of small and medium-sized enterprises to sustainable operations and business models.

Ghada Rifai: An architect and urban planner from Aleppo, integrating urban planning with peacebuilding to promote active citizenship and local governance. She co-founded Mobaderoon. Her work has focused on supporting women-led institutions and initiatives during the war, and she continues these efforts through Mobaderoon and Kafaat For Reconstruction to strengthen the role of communities, particularly women, in reconstruction processes. She holds a Master's degree in Post-War and Disaster Reconstruction from Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University and is currently pursuing a PhD in Global Urban Studies at Rutgers University. She previously worked on the rehabilitation of Aleppo's Old City, managed the Aleppo Urban Observatory, and contributed to projects in urban poverty alleviation and child-friendly city planning. Her work has received several international awards, including the Livia Award for Peace.

She is a member of the Lebanese League for Women in Business, Chair of the Local Development Committee of the Zahle Union of Municipalities, and a volunteer with “Restaurants du Coeur”. In 2022, she founded the Bookerang book renting initiative to promote education in the Bekaa community. She holds a Bachelor of Management Studies, along with specialized certificates in Circular Economy and Sustainable Packaging, Sustainable Local Economic Development, the Foundations of Effective Training Design, Sustainable Business Development, and Sustainability and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Consulting. She is completing her MBA studies in Leadership and Sustainability.

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Preparation and drafting of the report based on notes
from the sessions: **Rita Tannoury**
Illustration design and visual layout: **Aya Debes**
Webinar sessions note-taking: **Zeinab Kdouh**
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