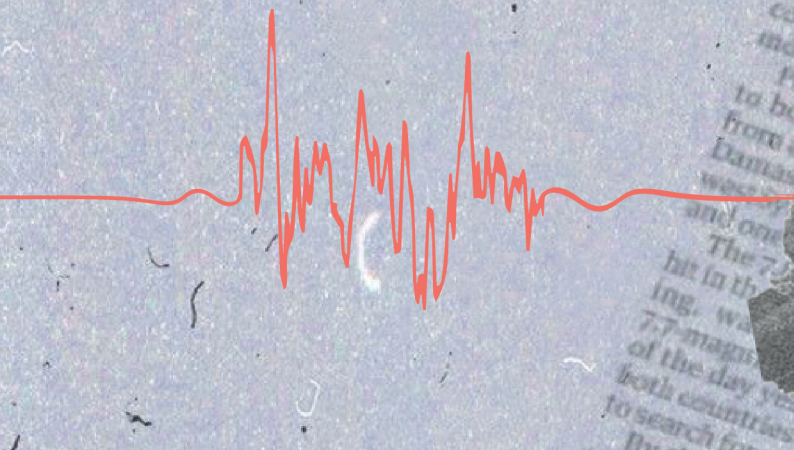




**NOW IS NOT THE TIME
FOR YOU
OR YOUR NEEDS**

**A Feminist Intersectional Analysis
of the 2023 Earthquakes
in Syria and Turkey**

Catastrophic: thousands dead as
earthquake hits Turkey and Syria



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“Now is not the time for you or your needs”: A Feminist Intersectional Analysis of the 2023 Earthquakes in Syria and Turkey
February 2024

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A year after the catastrophic earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, and upon the release of this report, numerous individuals continue to endure the aftermath. From the emotional toll they bear to the enduring reality of residing in camps and coping with the loss of their loved ones, their plight remains profound. Our heartfelt condolences extend to each survivor navigating this humanitarian crisis. We remain dedicated to advocating for the needs and well-being of those affected, striving to bring their challenges to the forefront of awareness and action.

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1 Introduction

On 6 February 2023, a catastrophic earthquake shook northern Syria and southern Turkey, unleashing consequences that reverberated far beyond the immediate tremors. Since then, the unforeseen natural disaster has not only disrupted communities, but has also added a new layer of complexity to an already tumultuous socio-political landscape for Syrians living in affected areas in Syria and Turkey. Although the global precedence of such an earthquake is not unique, it holds unique significance in the Syrian context due to the ongoing conflict, geopolitical intricacies and existing challenges faced by the population.

Beyond coping with the immediate physical and emotional consequences of the disaster, Syrians in both countries also had to navigate intricate political ramifications — challenges that, for many, persist today. The earthquake intensified their pre-existing vulnerabilities, enmeshing them further in the wider political and geopolitical struggles they have already endured. In particular, Syrian women found themselves contending with a gender-blind, obstructed, weaponised and manipulated disaster response, coupled with increased displacement within war-torn Syria. Additionally, as refugees in Turkey, they faced a maze of political dynamics, including discrimination, bureaucratic hurdles and gender-related challenges. Throughout this ordeal, the Syrian people themselves, drawing upon local resources and adaptable movements not confined by borders or conflict zones, played a vital role in saving lives and compensating for the inadequate response from both government and international systems. Remarkably, women emerged as unsung heroines, embodying altruism and community solidarity.

Drawing from the invaluable insights and real-life experiences of Syrian women who endured the 2023 earthquakes and their aftermath in both Syria and Turkey, this paper seeks to better understand the significant gap in disaster response in conflict zones such as Syria. In conflict-affected areas, there is often a deficiency in the comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and the intersectional factors influenced by political and conflict-related contexts. This gap results in crisis management strategies that inadequately account for the unique vulnerabilities, requirements and capabilities of different groups, as well as the complexities of the ongoing conflict.

Our primary goal is to amplify the voices of Syrian women, and utilise their insights to offer well-informed, intersectional, feminist and gender- and conflict-sensitive recommendations for more effective disaster response and recovery efforts in Syria and similar conflict-affected regions. We aim to challenge traditional notions of disaster management that perpetuate gender inequalities and disregard conflict and political dynamics by exploring the intensified challenges faced by women and girls, the intersection of conflict dynamics and humanitarian operations and the emergence of resilient women's leadership.



2

SETTING THE STAGE: CONTEXT, MAGNITUDE AND INTERCONNECTED DYNAMICS

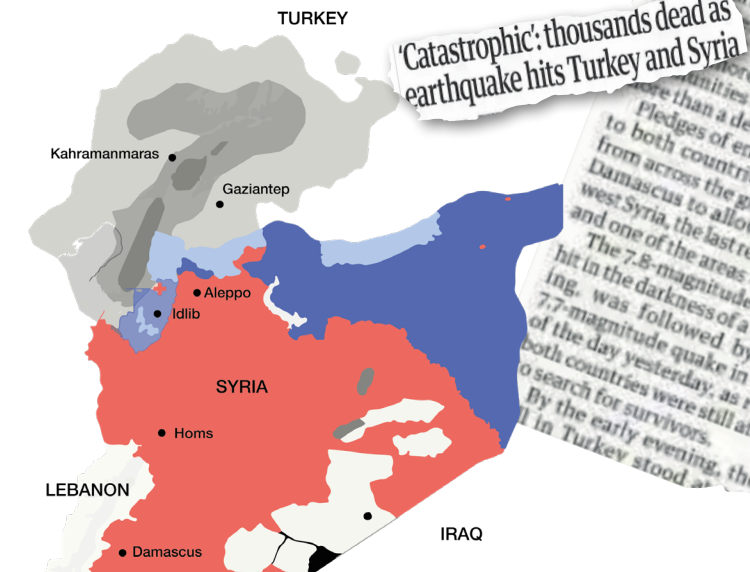


2-1) KNOW THE CONTEXT:

A Multifaceted Political and Humanitarian Crisis

The situation in Syria, intertwined with the experiences of Syrians in the diaspora, presents a complex tapestry of challenges and resilience.

Beginning with the uprisings in 2011, which escalated into a full-blown war, the situation in Syria has resulted in over 580,000 deaths ([UNHCR, 2024¹](#)) and the fragmentation of the country into multiple areas of control, fuelling tensions and civil strife. The humanitarian situation was dire even before the February 2023 earthquakes, with 15.3 million Syrians already in need of humanitarian assistance ([UNHCR, 2024²](#)). Additionally, the conflict had seen a significant increase in instances of sexual- and gender-based violence, documented both as a weapon of war and within domestic and communal settings ([Herremans & Bellintani, 2023³](#)).



To date, the 13-year conflict has displaced 12 million Syrians ([UNHCR, 2024⁴](#)), with approximately 3.5 million registered as refugees in Turkey by 2022 ([Tumen, 2023⁵](#)), reflecting a complex dynamic. Initially welcoming, public sentiment in Turkey has shifted, with increasing calls for refugee repatriation amid political and economic challenges ([Erdogan, 2022](#)). Syrian refugees have endeavoured to adapt, with a significant number of Syrian children born and enrolled in Turkish schools ([Erdogan, 2022⁶](#)). Yet, increasing social tensions are prompting a growing number of refugees to contemplate relocating to other countries.

By March 2022, 12 years into the conflict, the Syrian regime had regained approximately 70% of the nation's territory, while opposition forces continued to govern the remaining territories within three distinct control zones, each operating with unique administrative and governance structures ([Yacoubian, 2023⁷](#)). The situation has remained roughly unchanged to this day.

1 UNHCR. (2024). Syria situation. Global Focus. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>

2 UNHCR. (2024). Syria situation. Global Focus. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>

3 Herremans, Brigitte, and Veronica Bellintani. «Overcoming the Justice Impasse in Syria.» In *Transitional Justice in Aparadigmatic Contexts*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.

4 UNHCR. (2024). Syria situation. Global Focus. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>

5 Tumen, S. (2023, April). The case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye: Successes, challenges, and ... thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/a007833298df4b9c3735602711dd9289-0050062023/original/WDI2023-Turkey-case-study-FORMATTED.pdf

6 ERDOAN, M. M. (2022, November). SYRIANS BAROMETER 2021 A FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING SOCIAL COHESION WITH SYRIANS IN TÜRKYE . [unhcr.org/. https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/12/SB-2021-English-01122022.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/12/SB-2021-English-01122022.pdf)

7 Yaacoubian, M. (2023, March 14). Syria's stalemate has only benefitted Assad and his backers. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/syrias-stalemate-has-only-benefitted-assad-and-his-backers>

2-2) GRASP THE MAGNITUDE:

A Glimpse into the Devastating Impact of the Earthquake Crisis

The Syrian Center for Policy Research (2023⁸) reported a staggering death toll of **10,659 Syrians**, including **4,267 outside Syria** and **6,392 casualties within Syria**. Thousands more were injured.

AFFECTED POPULATION

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE (SYRIA)

The earthquake's impact was most severe in north-western Syria, where it affected an extensive area. The disaster struck **170 sub-districts** within **43 districts** across ten governorates. Aleppo Governorate was among the worst affected, with around **4.2 million people** experiencing various levels of impact. Idlib Governorate also faced significant effects, with nearly three million people affected by the earthquake (OCHA, 2023⁹).

The earthquake had a profound impact on **11** provinces in Turkey, resulting in a tragic loss of over **48,000 lives** and more than **100,000 injuries** (UN Women, 2023)¹⁰. The south-eastern provinces, home to nearly 14 million people, including approximately two million Syrian refugees (Support to Life, 2023¹¹), bore the brunt of the earthquake's impact.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE (TURKEY)

DESTRUCTION AND DISPLACEMENT

By the first week of March 2023, the earthquake had displaced at least **170,810** people in Syria, with **155,174 displaced** in north-western Syria where over 9,100 buildings collapsed (UNDP, 2023¹²), and **15,637** in regime-controlled areas (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2023¹³). In Turkey, **273,000 buildings** were destroyed, and at least **2.7 million people**, including migrants, were displaced in various settings in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake (International Organization for Migration, 2023¹⁴). Ten months into the earthquake, a total of **787,152 affected** people still lived in temporary settlements (Support to Life, 2023¹⁵).

8 Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). The Impact of the Earthquake in Syria: The Missing Developmental Perspective in the Shadow of Conflict <https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-Impact-of-the-Earthquake-in-Syria-SCPR-EN-2.pdf>

9 OCHA. (2023, Feb. 14). Flash Appeal: Syrian Arab Republic Earthquake (February - May 2023) [EN/AR]. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/flash-appeal-syrian-arab-republic-earthquake-february-may-2023-enar>

10 UN Women. (2023, March 20). Gender brief: Livelihoods and access to work of refugees from Ukraine ... [unwomen.org. https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Final%20English%20livelihoods%20brief%202%20June.pdf](https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Final%20English%20livelihoods%20brief%202%20June.pdf)

11 Support to Life. (2023, May 12). Turkey-earthquake: Emergency situation report (10.05.2023) - türkiye. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkey-earthquake-emergency-situation-report-10052023#:~:text=Hatay%2C%20Kahramanmara%C5%9F%2C%20Kilis%2C%20Osmaniye,around%202%20million%20Syrian%20refugees.>

12 UNDP. (2023). UNDPs response: Türkiye-Syria earthquakes. [undp.org. https://www.undp.org/turkiye-syria-earthquakes](https://www.undp.org/turkiye-syria-earthquakes)

13 Syrian Centre for Policy Research. (2023, August). The impact of the earthquake in Syria - [scpr-syria.org. https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-Impact-of-the-Earthquake-in-Syria-SCPR-EN-2.pdf](https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-Impact-of-the-Earthquake-in-Syria-SCPR-EN-2.pdf)

14 International Organization for Migration. (2023a, March 6). IOM: 2023 earthquakes displacement overview - türkiye (March 2023) - türkiye. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/iom-2023-earthquakes-displacement-overview-turkiye-march-2023>

15 Support to Life. (2023c, December 26). Turkey-earthquake: Emergency situation report (22.12.2023) - türkiye. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkey-earthquake-emergency-situation-report-22122023>

2-3) RECOGNISE THE INTERPLAY:

The Interconnected Dynamics of Conflict, Gender and Humanitarian Crises Amid the Earthquakes

The aftermath of the 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey has revealed the complex challenges confronting a population already deeply immersed in enduring conflict and political turmoil. **The earthquakes have acted as an illuminating window, offering valuable insight into the interconnected layers of conflict, gender dynamics and crisis response across multiple fronts.**



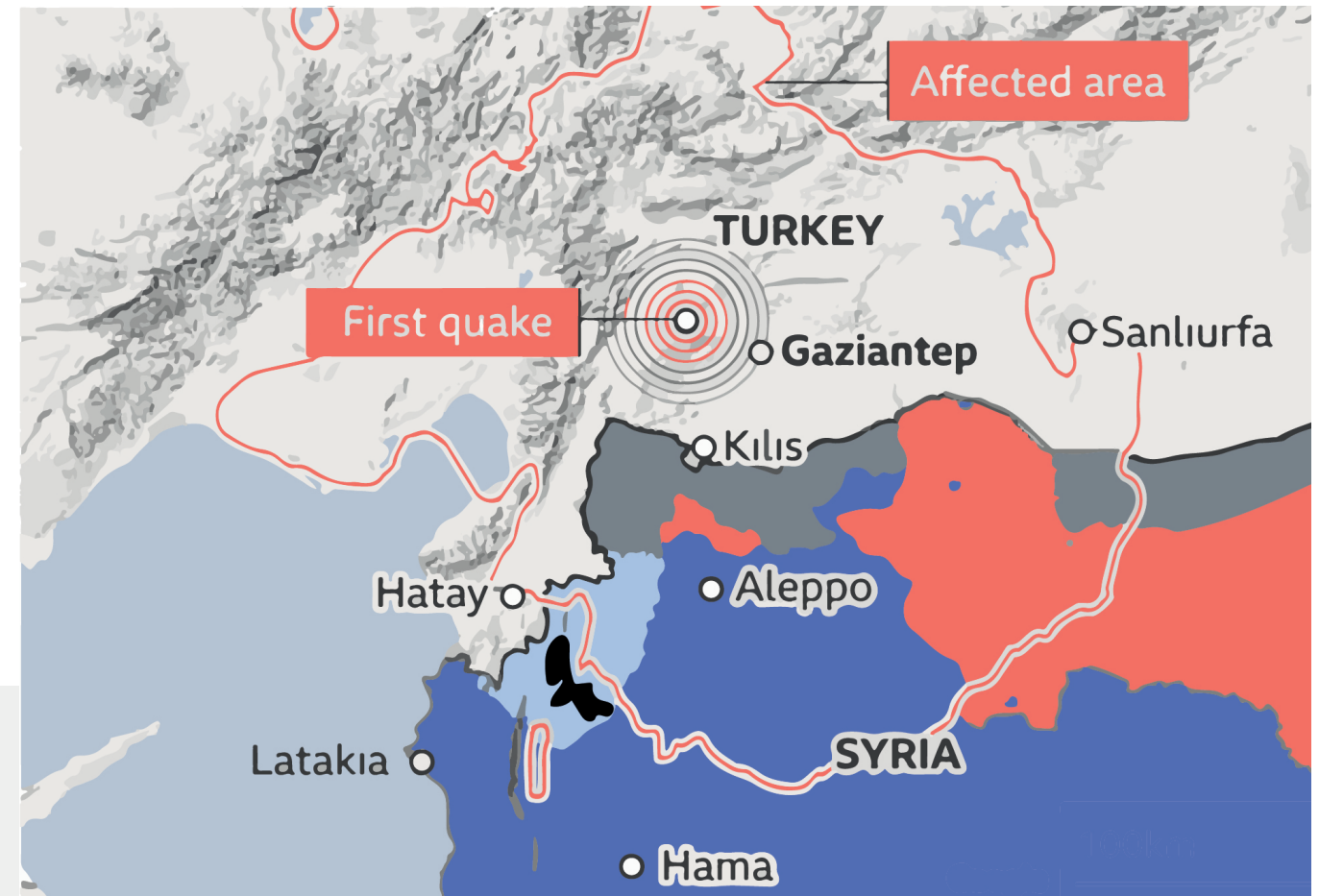
2-3-1) POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE ACROSS SYRIA

The Syrian regime and its allies have long manipulated humanitarian aid for political gains, notably restricting access and exacerbating the conflict's impact on civilians. For over a decade, the regime has impeded, weaponised and manipulated aid, using it to reward allies and punish adversaries (iMMAP, 2023)¹⁶. In response, the UN Security Council enacted a cross-border resolution approximately ten years ago, allowing for UN-led aid operations in northern Syria without requiring approval from the Syrian government. However, Russian efforts continued to undermine this resolution, eventually resulting in its termination in July 2023. The reduction of cross-border aid corridors from four to one has significantly impacted millions living in areas outside regime control (iMMAP, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the earthquake response was characterised by a clear politicisation of the humanitarian response, exposing systemic failures in prioritising the rights and needs of affected populations by the regime, the UN and international actors.

Up until 13 February, eight days after the initial earthquake, the Syrian government, backed by Russia, continued to oppose the use of alternative Turkish border crossings to access northwest Syria, insisting that aid should be exclusively delivered via government-controlled areas. President Bashar al-Assad eventually authorised UN aid through two additional border crossings on 13 February, but this delayed decision was deemed to be inadequate (Human Rights Watch, 2023)¹⁷. Despite clear road conditions and accessible border crossings, the UN's reluctance to proceed without permission from the Syrian regime or the UN Security Council resulted in delays in critical aid delivery (MMAP, 2023).

The UN did not fully employ rapid response mechanisms like the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group in opposition-held areas, although these were operational in regime-controlled regions in Syria and in Turkey. Aid and rescue efforts also faced barriers in reaching opposition-controlled areas. For example, the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) in north-western Syria did not receive any search and rescue equipment from the UN (IBRAHIM et al., 2023)¹⁸.



Additional challenges in providing humanitarian aid in northern Syria arose from the actions of the Syrian government and Turkish-backed armed factions. These actions hindered the entry of aid into the region, with a particular focus on impeding provisions sent by Kurdish authorities, stemming from ongoing territorial disputes (Amnesty International, 2023)¹⁹.

Allowing the Syrian government to dictate aid access in areas beyond regime control jeopardised and continues to neglect the well-being and fundamental rights of millions of Syrians (Zayadin, 2023)²⁰. Nevertheless, the Syrian people, relying on local capabilities and flexible movements unhindered by borders or conflict lines, played a crucial role in saving lives amid the shortcomings of the international humanitarian apparatus (Katoub²¹, 2023).

¹⁶ iMMAP. (2023, November 17). Post-Earthquake Perspective Challenges and Strategies for Humanitarian Aid in Northwest Syria. [immap.org. https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/iMMAP-Post-Earthquake-Perspective-Challenges-and-Strategies-for-Humanitarian-Aid-in-Northwest-Syria-Part-1.pdf](https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/iMMAP-Post-Earthquake-Perspective-Challenges-and-Strategies-for-Humanitarian-Aid-in-Northwest-Syria-Part-1.pdf)

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch. (2023, February 15). Northwest Syria: Aid Delays Deadly for Quake Survivors. [reliefweb.int. https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northwest-syria-aid-delays-deadly-quake-survivors-enar](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northwest-syria-aid-delays-deadly-quake-survivors-enar)

¹⁸ Ibrahim, Ali., et al. (2023, December 10). Syrian government blocked UN earthquake response in opposition areas. [sirajsy.net. https://sirajsy.net/syrian-government-blocked-un-earthquake-response-in-opposition-areas-2/](https://sirajsy.net/syrian-government-blocked-un-earthquake-response-in-opposition-areas-2/)

¹⁹ Amnesty International UK. (2023, March 6). Syria: government forces and Turkey-backed armed groups have diverted earthquake aid. [Amnesty.Org.Uk. Retrieved from https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-government-forces-and-turkey-backed-armed-groups-have-diverted-earthquake-aid](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-government-forces-and-turkey-backed-armed-groups-have-diverted-earthquake-aid)

²⁰ Zayadin, H. (2023, July 14). Relying on Syrian government for Cross Border Aid Delivery is untenable. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/14/relying-syrian-government-cross-border-aid-delivery-untenable>

²¹ Katoub, M. (2023, February 20). Border-shaking earthquake response [aljumhuriya.net. aljumhuriya.net. https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2023/02/20/border-shaking-earthquake-response/](https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2023/02/20/border-shaking-earthquake-response/)

2-3-2) A COMPLEX SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY

The earthquakes brought to light the complex situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey, who were already navigating a nuanced socio-political landscape. At the time of the disaster, approximately 1.74 million refugees, including Syrians under various protection statuses, were living in the 11 provinces most affected by the earthquakes, as reported by **UN Women in 2023**²².

Even before the earthquake, Syrian refugee women in Turkey faced multiple challenges, including language barriers that limited their access to rights and services as well as housing and income-generating jobs, and a lack of awareness about support services for legal, home care and psychosocial issues (**UN Women, 2018**²³). These challenges were compounded by risks of sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, early marriages and illegal polygamous marriages as families sought to mitigate financial burdens (**International Crisis Group, 2019**²⁴).

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Syrian refugees in Turkey have reportedly faced exacerbated challenges due to their noncitizen status, which has limited their access to earthquake relief resources (**Akgundogdu, 2023**²⁵). Numerous reports have surfaced regarding the denial and confiscation of aid, coupled with severe restrictions on the movement of Syrian survivors (**Sjac, 2023**²⁶). A report titled “Migration and Earthquake – **Due Diligence Report**”²⁷ released on 13 March 2023, pointed out that Syrians were repeatedly displaced from tent cities, temporary shelters and even locations designated for them by the government following the earthquake. It also highlighted that challenges related to accommodation, hygiene, access to clean water and psychosocial support persist for those who continue to reside in the earthquake-affected cities. Additionally, in the days following the earthquake, the terms “looting” and “Syrian” had become synonymous in certain online circles, further fuelling public resentment towards the refugee population.



2-3-3) GENDER DYNAMICS IN SYRIA AND TURKEY: BETWEEN THE CONFLICT AND EARTHQUAKES

The ongoing conflict in Syria has imposed a profound and gender-specific burden on women and girls. This gendered impact is rooted in already-entrenched legal and customary discrimination, which has been exacerbated by the protracted armed conflict. For example, basic rights, including access to food and health care, have been severely compromised, with female-headed households facing double the struggle compared to their male-headed counterparts. Tragically, forced and early marriages have spiked as a direct consequence of the conflict, disproportionately impacting young girls. Additionally, the prevalence of sexual- and gender-based violence has significantly risen throughout the country during the conflict, leaving an estimated 7.3 million individuals, primarily women and girls, in dire need of gender-based violence-related services in 2023 (**Gendered Impact, 2023**²⁸).

Gender dynamics also pose significant challenges for Syrian refugees in Turkey. For instance, women — who often arrive without identity documents — face difficulties entering the job market due to challenges securing work permits. When employed, they typically work in the informal sector, with lower wages and limited or non-existent job security. Language barriers further compound their struggles, restricting them to crowded and peripheral refugee areas. Additionally, stereotypes about Syrian refugee women persist, with unfounded claims that they have come to Turkey to pursue relationships with Turkish men, further complicating their integration and well-being (**PELÉ, 2020**²⁹).

In light of these pre-existing challenges, the February 2023 earthquakes have underscored profound gender inequalities facing Syrian women and emphasised the critical need for gender-sensitive disaster response strategies. For instance, in north-western Syria, a staggering 73% of females reported an increase or maintenance of incidents of violence within their homes since the earthquakes occurred. Additionally, the loss of fathers in earthquake-affected households has resulted in a rise in female-headed households, increasing from 14% to 18.4%, as documented by **UN Women**³⁰ in December 2023. Furthermore, approximately 130,000 pregnant women in Turkey were directly impacted by the earthquake and faced challenging circumstances during childbirth in dire conditions (**mei.edu, August 2023**³¹). These are just a few of the documented gendered challenges imposed by the earthquakes.

22 UN Women. (2023a). Gender analysis of the earthquake impact in northwestern Syria. arabstates.unwomen.org. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/justified-gender-analysis-of-the-earthquake-impact-in-northwestern-syria.pdf>.

23 Çevik, K., Aliolu, A.S., Yücel, A., Utas, C., Luchsinger, G., Kavlak, .V., Kristjansdottir, I.B. and Freizer, S., 2018. Needs assessment of Syrian women and girls under temporary protection status in Turkey. UN Women.

24 International Crisis Group. (2019). Risks Facing Syrian Refugee Youth in anliurfa. In Mitigating Risks for Syrian Refugee Youth in Turkey's anliurfa (p. Page 4-Page 11). International Crisis Group. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31355.5>

25 Akgundogdu, S. (2023, March 20). Turkish backlash: How street interviews spread anti-Syrian refugee sentiment. The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkish-backlash-how-street-interviews-spread-anti-syrian-refugee-sentiment>

26 Sjac. (2023, March 10). As rescue efforts wind down, Syrian survivors face discrimination amidst desolation in Turkey. Syria Justice & Accountability Centre. <https://syriaaccountability.org/as-rescue-efforts-wind-down-syrian-survivors-face-discrimination-amidst-desolation-in-turkey/>

27 Sert, D., Dani, D., & Sevinin, E. (2023, March). Durum Tespit Raporu: Göç Ve Deprem.

[https://gocarastirmalaridernegi.org/attachments/article/311/Göç ve Deprem - Durum Tespit Raporu.pdf](https://gocarastirmalaridernegi.org/attachments/article/311/Göç%20ve%20Deprem%20-%20Durum%20Tespit%20Raporu.pdf)

28 INDEPENDENT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC. (2023, June 12). Gendered Impact of the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Women and Girls.

29 PELÉ, M. (2020, December 27). Syrian refugee women in Turkey: A gendered integration process. Institut du Genre en Géopolitique. <https://igg-geo.org/?p=2766&lang=en>

30 UN Women. (2023, July). Gender assessment of the impact of the 2023 earthquake and the ... arabstates.unwomen.org. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/n-syria-final-toute.pdf>

31 Karademir, B. S. (2023, November 2). Building back better with gender in mind: Centering Turkey's women and girls in earthquake recovery. www.mei.edu. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-back-better-gender-mind-centering-turkeys-women-and-girls-earthquake-recovery>

3

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: CAPTURING FIRST-HAND PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS



While there is a growing academic interest in studying the earthquakes and their aftermath, the true severity and complexity of the impact can be best understood by listening to the voices of those who have lived through them. These individuals are best positioned to highlight the gaps within the response efforts and provide valuable insights that can inform future recommendations.

Therefore, going beyond the statistics and traditional research approaches, our goal has been to comprehensively examine the intersectional impact of the earthquake by actively engaging with women who directly or indirectly experienced the earthquake crisis in Syria and Turkey. To achieve this, we organised four gender-specific focus group discussions involving women who were impacted. These discussions provided a platform to explore their collective experiences and facilitate open dialogue on various topics, including gender issues, humanitarian response, the compounded impacts of the conflict and the earthquake and the roles of women in disaster response.

The selection of participants was purposefully carried out, taking into consideration the earthquake-affected regions (southern Turkey and northern Syria), various age groups (ranging from 23 to 55 years old to address diverse needs) and the inclusion of women of different nationalities (Syrian and Syrian Turkish, where applicable). Each focus group consisted of seven to ten participants. In addition to the focus group discussions, we conducted three semi-structured interviews to complement the data collected and address any identified data gaps.

In our research approach, we employed feminist methodologies that emphasise the significance of individual experiences while avoiding broad generalisations or claims of representation.

As with any research endeavour, it is crucial to acknowledge that limitations exist, and our work remains open to further development, modification and constructive criticism. A primary constraint was the time limitations inherent in post-disaster contexts. The dynamic and time-sensitive nature of disaster aftermath necessitates rapid research responses, which can challenge the depth and scope of in-depth investigations. Ensuring representation of a diverse age range, particularly girls and young women under 20, posed an additional challenge. Although the difficulty in accessing the perspectives of both younger and older women could impact the comprehensiveness of our findings, the insights gathered from the represented demographics still offer substantial value, shedding light on the experiences and needs of these groups in disaster situations. Another limitation was the restricted geographic diversity, especially concerning women participants from Turkey. Our focus was primarily on specific areas impacted by the earthquake, predominantly Gaziantep, which may have excluded other useful insights from crucial regions like Hatay and Urfa. Despite these limitations, the research carries considerable value. It sets the stage for more extensive future research that can build upon these initial findings, and offers valuable gender-sensitive and feminist recommendations for more efficient and comprehensive crisis response strategies and mechanisms.

4

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF SYRIAN WOMEN: A FEMINIST INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE 2023 EARTHQUAKES



4-1) UNVEILING GENDERED CHALLENGES IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE EARTHQUAKES

Insights from Syrian women, residing both within Syria and in the affected regions of Turkey, offer invaluable perspectives on the disproportionate and intersecting impacts of natural disasters and disaster response on women and girls in conflicted-affected settings. In the context of the Syria/Turkey earthquake, their testimonies and experiences help peel back the layers of the earthquake's impact, going beyond the immediate destruction to uncover the long-lasting, multifaceted repercussions on vulnerable populations with a special emphasis on the gendered dimensions of these experiences.

According to the women we interviewed for this analysis, the immediate aftermath of the earthquake was harrowing. They faced challenges from the moment they had to evacuate their homes and seek shelter in cars, camps or with unfamiliar hosts. Relocating to camps or relatives' houses also brought [privacy](#), [hygiene](#) and [social challenges](#), especially for women. Additionally, mothers faced an even greater burden.



“

“After the second earthquake, we evacuated our house. We went to a very small camp hastily, where there wasn't anything available. I had to wear full field gear all the time, and for 24 hours, I couldn't even take off my hijab to move comfortably. Although I knew the people in the neighbouring tents, we couldn't really feel at ease. I couldn't go to the bathroom for 14 hours because I didn't feel comfortable going in. When we returned home, I started crying and told my father that I couldn't bear it anymore. They [men] were fine, going in and out of the tent to socialise, while I felt trapped inside.” (Syria, Idlib)

“I remember one time when we were staying in a place with my family and a large group of people, I was not able to take a shower for more than eight or ten days. When I requested to shower, there was indignation even from women, as if to say, ‘Now you want to take a shower?’” (Syria, Latakia)

”

“

“It was night, raining; and whatever we did, it was essentially impossible to keep warm. In the mosque, the situation wasn't any better because there was actually no heating. The door was open, it was raining and snowing outside. People were coming in and out, children were crying. I went to the mosque and stayed there for about two hours. Hearing the children crying made the situation feel very dire. The mental state of the mothers was at its worst. How can a mother protect her children and maintain her own mental health under such conditions?” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“

“I am a mother of seven children. We woke up to a disaster, as our building was severely impacted by the earthquake. My family and I, totalling nine people, ended up sleeping in a car for two days. Aftershocks made the situation even more challenging, especially since I couldn't provide a sense of safety to my children. They depended on me, and I was afraid. We eventually moved to the camps, which were less risky. However, the situation was catastrophic in terms of privacy. We stayed at my uncle's house, which was difficult for my daughters because my cousin's sons were also at home with them. Using the bathroom was a challenge, and it was considered the girl's fault if she couldn't control herself enough to urinate discreetly.” (Syria, Idlib)



An alarming aspect in the aftermath of the earthquake was the [neglect of women's essential needs in aid distribution](#), namely underwear and sanitary pads. Survivors in Syria and Turkey highlighted this on multiple occasions. Women who were menstruating were also often subjected to [hate speech and harassment](#) by their surrounding community.

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“In certain instances, those who were menstruating during the earthquake in Latakia and Aleppo were unfairly described as impure. Some women faced barriers when trying to seek shelter in churches and mosques. Others were not given access to essential menstrual hygiene products and felt embarrassed to request them. Certain women were told that ‘now is not the time for you or your needs,’ and some were even prohibited from sharing food while menstruating.” (Syria, Damascus [the participant engaged in response efforts in affected areas])

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“One of the situations that stood out to me was when a woman had to live with her husband’s family, which included his mother, sisters and their families. There were discussions about who would dispose of the sanitary pads, and she didn’t want them to notice her doing it. At one point, her brother-in-law asked her not to enter the kitchen while she was menstruating because they didn’t want to eat the food she cooked during that time. When she voiced her concerns to her husband, he simply expressed his discomfort and advised her to be more discreet.”

(Syria, Lattakia)

The earthquake also deeply affected the [mental well-being of Syrian women](#) in both Syria and Turkey. One woman’s testimony reflects the lasting psychological scars:

“Even a month after the earthquake, I literally couldn’t sleep for more than an hour a day! I developed a nervous condition, and I am still taking medication for it. Many people don’t believe our fear, but we are still terrified!”

(Syria, Lattakia)

Mothers, in particular, bore an overwhelming psychological burden as they navigated constant fear for their safety while shouldering the immense responsibility of caring for their families, rendering them vulnerable. Furthermore, societal expectations often unfairly placed the entire weight of ensuring children’s well-being on women, neglecting or downplaying the roles of men.

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“The earthquake had a profound psychological impact on me. Despite considering myself strong and capable of handling difficult situations, I felt vulnerable during the earthquake. I was uncertain about how to ensure the safety of my children and myself.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“Women carried an additional burden during the earthquake. If there was any danger or harm to the children, people would inquire about their mother’s whereabouts and why she wasn’t taking care of them. Strangely, no one would ask about the father’s whereabouts. This added more pressure on women who were already shocked and terrified.”

(Syria, Idleb)



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“There was a young woman, aged 22, with her infant daughter. When the earthquake struck, she immediately pushed away her daughter out of fear. She used to breastfeed her at night but stopped doing so after the earthquake. The daughter had taken a stance against her mother and refused to breastfeed from her. However, her situation was not understood by her family, husband and those around her. Everyone blamed her, saying that if she loved her daughter or felt a sense of responsibility, she wouldn’t have acted this way.” (Syria, Lattakia)

“I have a child who suffers from a psychological condition that is excessive fear. The situation has become more difficult after the earthquake ... I know many cases, not only like my son’s case, many of them had difficulty due to the interruption of their receipt of services and psychological care.”

(Turkey, Gaziantep)

The discussions also shed light on a deeply concerning trend: [a significant increase in violence against women](#) in specific earthquake-affected areas. The convergence of a natural disaster and pre-existing conflict dynamics created a hazardous environment, particularly for women. One participant highlighted the gravity of the situation:

“I want to emphasise the risk of exploitation and sexual harassment that women were exposed to by some people who volunteered to work, as well as having to be in the over-crowded camps or shelters that increased their chances of being exposed to risks during the earthquake, in addition to physical and psychological violence by family members, such as fathers or brothers.” (Syria, Idleb)

The presence of communal bathrooms in accommodation centres, the absence of violence protection staff and the placement of male staff in women’s accommodation centres were identified as major oversights. This goes against the conservative nature of the community, as women may not feel comfortable reporting violations or exploitation to male personnel. Furthermore, we heard that some camp managers and volunteers involved in the response process and service provision committed violations against women. One participant shared, “For example, an employee took the information of a beautiful widow and asked her to stay with him at the site to get two baskets instead of one.” (Syria, Idleb)

Apart from strictly gender-specific accounts, [the intersectionality of factors like disability and age also heightened the vulnerabilities of specific groups](#), especially the elderly and persons with disabilities, leading to distinct struggles for each group. Unfortunately, accessibility to aid and the fulfilment of basic needs were often overlooked for individuals with disabilities, including those whose disabilities were a result of injuries sustained in the earthquake. Additionally, the elderly encountered multiple difficulties in meeting their needs during this challenging period.

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“Primarily for people with disabilities, there is a problem with the adaptation of vital facilities and infrastructure in the region, and they are in short supply. In earthquake areas, the struggle was greater for this group. When relief organisations started working and aid began to be distributed, they would choose a location and announce it... Sometimes they were not able to reach it, didn’t know how to reach the place... People with disabilities have not been taken into account, nor the different types of disability or how facilities should be provided to them.” (Syria, Idlib)

“The needs of the elderly were also very difficult to meet; those with chronic diseases lost their medication. Medical services were not provided at first.” (Syria, Idlib)

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“In one particular case, there was a woman who had suffered a broken pelvis and multiple fractures. She had also tragically lost her father, mother and all her sisters. In the aftermath, she sought refuge with distant relatives. Living in dire circumstances, she lacked even the most basic necessities and lacked a support system to care for her needs.” (Syria, Idlib)



The earthquake’s impact on women and girls was exacerbated by conflict dynamics in Syria and among refugees in Turkey. In northern Syria, limited access to resources and medical equipment in the wake of the earthquake severely affected women’s health, particularly during childbirth and miscarriages. Moreover, many women residing in makeshift structures in fragmented areas of Syria lacked necessary identification documents. This made accessing shelter in more stable buildings challenging, forcing them to contend with gender-specific challenges in poorly equipped camps. And in Turkey, Syrian women refugees were particularly prone to the discriminatory conditions that arose post-earthquake.

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“Some women gave birth due to the intensity of the earthquake, while others suffered miscarriages. There were not enough resources or equipment to respond to these cases effectively.” (Syria, Idlib)

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“There was an issue with identification documents. Many women who had been displaced earlier [due to the war and conflict] lacked the necessary documentation. They were asked to provide proof of identity to receive a room, and some of them couldn’t obtain it due to the lack of proper documentation.” (Syria, Latakia)

“Women seeking hospital care were either required to have a valid travel permit [this permit is issued for temporary protection status holders to move between provinces] or faced the burden of paying exorbitant fees for admission. The educational sector also suffered significant disruptions, with some girls unable to continue their education due to residency registration issues. In Gaziantep, despite having registration in Antakya, they [survivors displaced from Antakya] were unable to enrol in schools without valid local registration.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

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“This situation created a sense of insecurity and instability, particularly affecting women. As a consequence of these conditions and the deteriorating living situation, many men preferred to voluntarily return to areas in northwest Syria or to travel to Europe, leaving their wives behind to await family reunification.” (Turkey)

In sum, the earthquake laid bare the immediate and compounded challenges faced by women and girls, and vulnerable groups more generally, in Syria and Turkey, revealing the intricacies of gendered experiences and emphasising the imperative for a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach in disaster response and recovery efforts. Women’s experiences during and in the aftermath of the earthquake underscore the necessity for comprehensive strategies that not only address the visible aftermath but also the deeply rooted systemic issues that perpetuate vulnerabilities for women in times of crisis. In conflict zones like Syria, women and vulnerable groups already face numerous challenges, and the earthquake significantly intensified these. The added burden of navigating post-earthquake realities on top of the ongoing conflict placed an enormous strain on them.

4-2) CHARTING UNCHARTED WATERS: AID AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN THE MIDST OF POLITICS

The 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey highlighted not just the logistical challenges of aid distribution but also the deeply rooted political complexities influencing resource allocation in crisis situations — which in turn can influence the responses and policies of regional governments and the international community.

In Syria, the earthquake's impact was intensified by the Syrian regime's actions. The regime's wartime destruction, economic policies, corruption and mismanagement significantly exacerbated the disaster's severity. Moreover, the regime has weaponised humanitarian assistance, obstructing its delivery to areas controlled by the opposition. In the disaster's wake, the regime continued to manipulate the distribution of humanitarian aid, simultaneously using the crisis to call for the lifting of international sanctions and to mend relations with regional and Western countries. This situation underscores the urgent need to tackle the political, social and economic challenges heightened by the earthquakes, both within Syria and in its dealings with the international community (Daher, 2023)³².

Following the earthquake, Assad's government, suspended from the Arab League since 2011, quickly leveraged the disaster and the resultant need for humanitarian aid in Syria for diplomatic gains. This calculated strategy rapidly evolved into an intensified diplomatic push, shifting blame for the devastation of Syria's infrastructure from Assad to the natural disaster. Notably, countries like Tunisia showed an interest in enhancing relations with Damascus; and Saudi Arabia, previously an ardent critic, sent aid to Aleppo. Assad also engaged diplomatically with other regional leaders, hosting foreign ministers and receiving high-level calls, reflecting a shift in regional dynamics (Hilani, 2023)³³.

The complexity of aid operations in Syria, particularly following the 2014 cross-border resolution, has had mixed effects. While the resolution improved aid delivery, it also created a scenario where millions depend on negotiations with those who initially hindered aid. The February earthquake intensified these challenges, especially in opposition-controlled areas. The Syrian regime's unaltered stance on aid access, evident in its post-earthquake behaviour like aid delays and access restrictions to the northwest, highlights the ongoing struggle for a principled humanitarian approach.

Moreover, the UN's growing cooperation with Damascus and its move towards a unified "One Syria" strategy raised concerns about the safety of aid workers and civil society actors in the northwest. Many of these individuals, labelled as terrorists by the regime for their humanitarian work, now face increased risks due to the potential information flow to the regime.

³² DAHER, Joseph, The aftermath of earthquakes in Syria : the regime's political instrumentalisation of a crisis, EUI, RSC, Research Project Report, Middle East Directions (MED), Syrian Trajectories Project, 2023/04 - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/75404>

³³ Hilani, Fadi, Disaster Politics and Earthquake Diplomacy in Syria and Turkey, Arab Center Washington DC, Mar 6, 2023 <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/disaster-politics-and-earthquake-diplomacy-in-syria-and-turkey/>

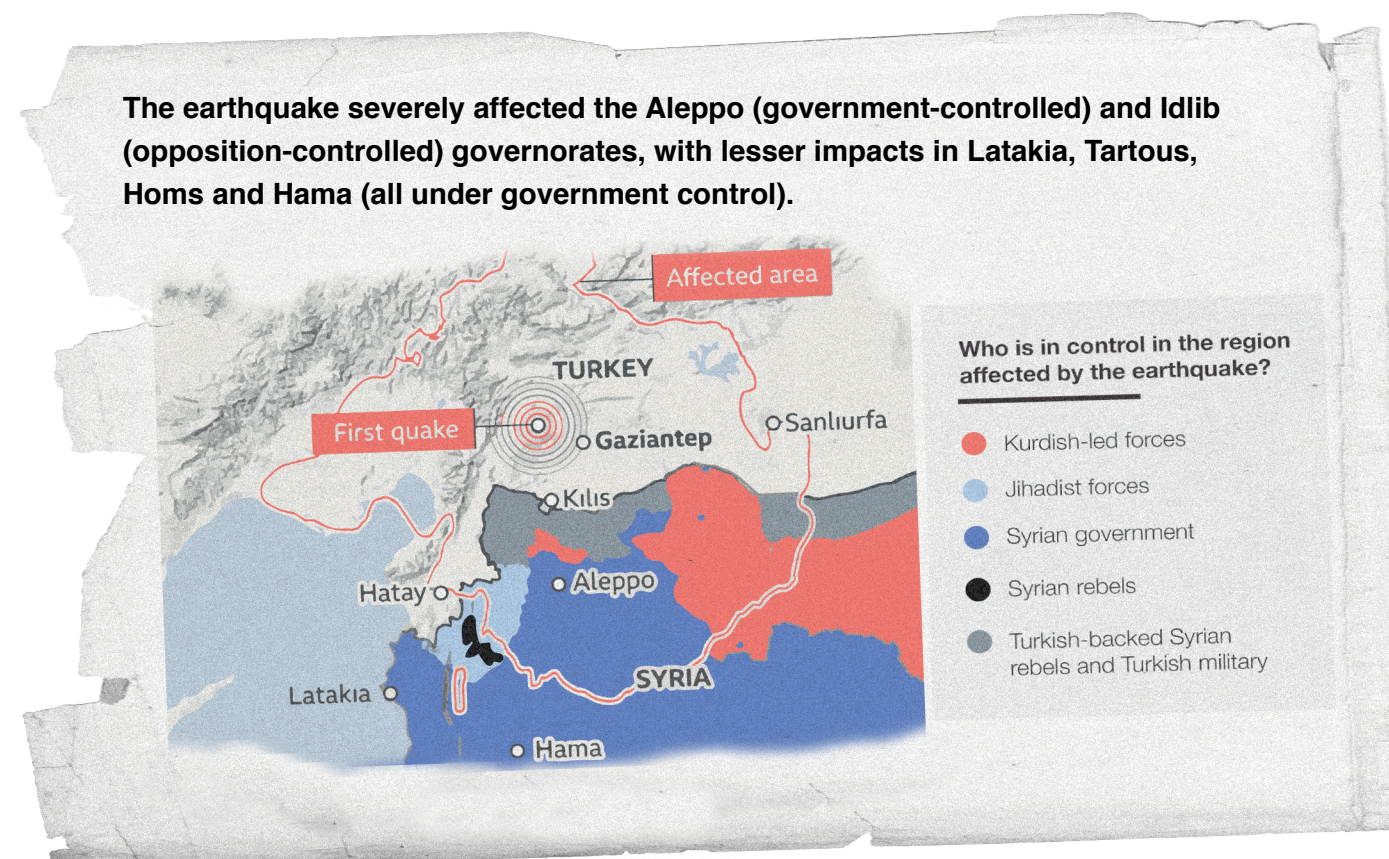
Recent arrests and harsh penalties for unregistered aid work in Damascus-controlled areas underscore these dangers (Beals, 2023³⁴).

Insights from women who have personally faced these politicised challenges starkly reveal the disparities in aid distribution and the intricate intertwining of politics, security and geopolitical factors.

4-2-1) AID DISTRIBUTION ACROSS SYRIA: POLITICAL INFLUENCES AT PLAY

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the urgency of aid delivery became a paramount concern. However, the unequal distribution across different regions underlined the complexities of navigating the political terrain in Syria. This issue manifested in various ways, impeding equitable and timely responses due to political considerations or other repercussions stemming from the war, such as internal strife.

"Many people did not receive their fair share of aid, and some may have died, possibly under the rubble, due to the politicisation of assistance and relief efforts!" (Syria, Lattakia)



³⁴ Beals, Emma. 2023, Lessons from Syria's aid response: The case for continued cross-border operations, Middle East Institute June 27, 2023 <https://mei.edu/publications/lessons-syrias-aid-response-case-continued-cross-border-operations>

4-2-1-1) Politics of Aid Delivery in Government-Controlled and Opposition-Held Territories

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the politicisation of aid delivery in Syria created significant delays and barriers across both government-controlled and opposition-held areas. International and local responses have been hindered by political manoeuvres, with aid routes and entry points being manipulated for strategic advantages. The complexities of internal conflicts and bureaucratic hurdles further obstructed relief efforts. This has led to severe consequences for the affected populations, as delays and selective aid distribution exacerbate the crisis and hinder lifesaving efforts.



A significant aspect of aid politicisation emerged in the way areas outside Syrian regime control experienced substantial delays and barriers in receiving aid compared to regions under its influence. Witnesses to the earthquake reported various manifestations of this issue: obstacles imposed by de-facto authorities including the Syrian government, preferential treatment and manipulation of aid routes into Syria³⁵. Particularly in northern Syria, and more so in Idlib, these political challenges were starkly evident.

Those outside and inside northern Syria shared how challenging it was to deliver aid across conflict lines, impacted both by actions from the Syrian regime and conflicts between various authorities in areas outside regime control.

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“In our communities subjected to different authorities, there was no way to provide assistance ... The delivery of aid to them proved exceedingly difficult. We saw video clips showing their lack of equipment to search for people trapped under rubble, and food supplies were not reaching them.”
(Syria, Aleppo)

“When the government opened a crossing from rural Aleppo to the north, rigorous inspections were required It’s hard to recall any aid reaching areas under opposition control through this route.” (Syria, Lattakia)

“The conflict within northern Syria between the areas of SDF³⁶, Tahrir al-Sham and the National Army [all outside regime control], and the presence of crossings and checkpoints between these areas affected the transfer of aid and equipment from one area to another.” (Syria, Idlib)

³⁵ “Between 9 February and 22 February, the Syrian government blocked at least 100 trucks carrying essential aid such as food, medical supplies and tents from entering Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods in Aleppo city. During the same period, Türkiye-backed armed opposition groups, which are part of an armed coalition called the Syrian National Army (SNA), also blocked at least 30 aid trucks from entering Afrin, a city in northern Aleppo occupied by Türkiye. In both instances, the aid was sent by Kurdish authorities, with whom both the Syrian government and Türkiye-backed armed groups have fought for control over territory in northern Syria”. Amnesty International March 6, 2023 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppos-desperate-hour-of-need/>

³⁶ Syrian Democratic Forces is a coalition formed by ethnic militias and rebel groups, and serves as the official military wing of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

The regime’s exploitation of the situation also emerged as a notable observation, contributing to the exacerbation of the crisis and to loss of life. A resident of Idlib highlighted that sovereignty in international law, which dictated that aid could only be delivered with government permission, allowed the regime to exploit this situation and to delay necessary aid.

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“There were a lot of manoeuvres, and in the end, the aid had to be inspected to enter through the regime. The regime wanted to show that it was providing assistance to the people of Idlib. This greatly delayed the arrival of aid, and the most vulnerable individuals were further delayed in receiving assistance due to these politics or disputes.”

Beyond local passage of aid, the situation in Idlib highlighted the broader issue of aid crossings manipulation and politicisation since the war began and its significant impact on aid distribution and on loss of lives. The delayed and selective entry of international aid became a major obstacle, severely hindering the humanitarian efforts.

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“As is well-known, in northern Syria, three border crossings have been closed for years due to a Russian UN decision. We consider this closure as politicisation of aid, which has greatly affected northern Syria in general ... Imagine the situation: when the earthquake happened, the only crossing that was open and the only source of hope for Syrians in the north was closed from the Turkish side for three days after the earthquake. This had a negative impact on the people. Many young people could have been helped through this crossing.” (Syria, Idlib)

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“At the international level, there was a noticeable delay in the entry of aid, even for the vehicles. The Syrian Civil Defense vehicles were delayed, and there were even protests demanding the entry of aid. It was supposed to be facilitated by the regime, as I recall, but the opposition did not agree to this decision in order not to portray the regime in a positive light. Also, I remember a moment when aid entry was allowed after the protests, but it was delayed significantly. Many people were still under the rubble. In my opinion, the response from foreign countries should have been stronger and faster. On the other hand, the response from within was much faster and stronger, thanks to local organisations.” (Northwest Syria)

Even in regime-held areas, the Syrian government also obstructed aid deliveries to survivors under its control, but who were perceived as opposition. According to Amnesty International, between 9 and 22 February, the government prevented trucks carrying fuel, tents, food and medical supplies provided by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and a local organisation from entering the “Kurdish” neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah in Aleppo. Even before the earthquake, these areas were facing depleted medical supplies, leaving them ill-prepared to cope with the earthquake-induced casualties (Amnesty International, 2023³⁷).

³⁷ Amnesty International, 2023, Syria: Vital earthquake aid blocked or diverted in Aleppo’s desperate hour of need. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppos-desperate-hour-of-need/>

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“For example, in government-controlled areas, there are certain governorates that did not have equipment for removing the rubble. For example, Aleppo Governorate had a huge shortage of equipment and vehicles, a large number of which were destroyed in the war and were not renewed after the end of the military operations. The earthquake exposed and revealed the government’s weakness in the regime-controlled areas and had a significant impact and increased the distrust in government institutions because their response compared to civil society and community initiatives was too small. The earthquake demonstrated the effectiveness of civil society’s role and response.” (Syria, Lattakia [the participant was engaged in the response efforts in Aleppo and other affected regime-controlled regions])

Government inspections and security approvals were also highlighted as a significant factor causing delays in aid delivery within government held areas.

“The organisations that entered [the affected areas in Aleppo] were under security cover, and the international organisations did not intervene primarily, but rather through local charitable associations by supporting projects or after getting permission of the ‘operations room’. Only the Red Crescent and the Syria Trust For Development were responsible for receiving and distributing aid, and they were late in the beginning and provided their services only when the situation stabilised.” (Syria, Aleppo)

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“Security approvals and clearance procedures were difficult and involved numerous questions and interrogations. It was possible that someone in need could die while waiting for security clearance.” (Syria, Lattakia)

Regardless of the exact reasons for the aid blockages or delays, it was the people under the rubble who paid the heaviest price. This political manoeuvring had severe consequences for the affected populations, further complicating an already challenging humanitarian response landscape.



4-2-1-2) Population Divide: The ‘Us vs. Them’ Mentality

Apart from international and governmental politicisation, there was also regional [across different regions in Syria] and internal politicisation among the public. The situation became very delicate in Syria as it was closely tied to the issue of territorial control, and it created a significant divide among the population, reverting to the problems of the war itself.

An activist in the Qalamoun region, which was relatively unaffected by the earthquake’s destruction, observed a refusal to welcome displaced individuals from hotspots and survivors from affected areas. A civil participant in relief efforts herself, she explained, “I was specifically told not to open our doors to them. I was told ‘Take whatever you want to help them, but do not bring them to us. You can go and help them there, but they don’t come here.’” She explained that this directive came from influential figures in the Qalamoun region whose decisions carried significant weight.

This attitude can be attributed to a desire to avoid a situation similar to what had happened with the people of al-Qusayr in 2012 and 2014, which is believed by some to have triggered the influx of revolutionary activity into the region, ultimately leading to war and destruction in Nabek, the capital of the Qalamoun³⁸.

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“One could argue that the evolution of the revolution paralleled the movement of individuals, and there was reluctance to revisit the stereotypes that had emerged between 2012-2014. Even today, when someone enters Nabek from outside, their identity is scrutinised at the checkpoint, or a resident from Nabek vouches for them before they are allowed in.” (Syria, Damascus)

Beyond Qalamoun, this divide could also be observed at the community level, particularly in places like Jablah, which is under government control. During the distribution of aid, there were instances where many people who had been displaced to Jablah during the war were not able to receive aid during the earthquake response because they were considered outsiders and had already been internally displaced. They were referred to as “Bedouins,” because they had distinct clothing or attire. Residents of the region would also question newcomers, asking where they had come from, how they had arrived and how they had received aid.

38 Al Qusayr city (administratively part of the Homs Governorate) was under the opposition control and against the regime. The Syrian regime and Hezbollah launched a military brutal campaign against it displacing people into areas of the Qalamoun region. After al-Qusayr fell to the Assad regime, many rebel fighters fled to Qalamoun.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep07896.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Abf5a5ccd4dcd22228a9397668cbca5cb&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

“The battle for Qalamoun has displaced thousands of families, many of whom had previously been displaced from Qusayr during the battle in May. Areas hosting large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have repeatedly been subject to violence”
<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/regional-analysis-syria-november-2013>

Additionally, there were instances of donors expressing preferences for distribution of items to some regions during the earthquake response, based on their own priorities or opinions. For instance, one witness who was involved in a donation drive to purchase clothing items, including hijabs and caps for women, recalled that one person expressed concerns about distributing hijabs in Jableh. The donor questioned why these items were intended for Jableh when they should be allocated for Aleppo.

On the other hand, some believe that the community-level attitudes were not necessarily related to politicisation but rather stemmed from a sense of fear due to limited resources. **A strong sense of support and solidarity within some communities was applauded.**



“Regarding northern Syria, this was not the case; quite the opposite, there was a strong popular response. People from Idlib, Ghouta, Homs, Daraya, and others all showed a significant response to the northern Syrian regions like Jandaris and Harim. There were substantial donations from northern Syria, as people contributed to the best of their abilities.” (Northwest Syria)

4-2-1-3) Adding Armed Factions into the Political Equation

The distribution of aid and execution of humanitarian missions in Syria were significantly affected by the widespread involvement of military and armed groups. These groups not only hindered the flow of aid but also highlighted the complex interplay between conflict dynamics and humanitarian efforts. Ranging from military factions to local armed segments, they created substantial challenges for humanitarian workers, hindering their initiatives and complicating the provision of aid.

Military factions often dictated the terms for humanitarian activities. Many sought to capitalise on the crisis, demanding portions of the aid or attempting to exert control over relief operations.



“One of the challenges on the road connecting Qamishli to Afrin is that armed factions blocked the arrival of humanitarian aid. We negotiated with them, involved the Russians, and they agreed to accept the aid but wanted a share of it. Eventually, humanitarian aid returned to our areas.” (Qamishli, Northeast Syria)

Furthermore, **the prevalence of armed groups created an atmosphere of insecurity for humanitarian workers.** Threats, intimidation and expulsion from areas controlled by armed groups became regrettable realities for those trying to provide assistance. The consequences of such interference not only affected immediate response efforts but also had long-term repercussions, impacting the resilience and recovery of communities affected by the earthquake.



“I worked in Jenderes and its surrounding countryside. We were an unregistered initiative and team on the ground. Following the earthquake, we started establishing a camp in the area. Our first obstacle was the armed faction controlling the region. We were located in an area called Anqala, where we obtained approvals from the mukhtar and the locals to set up the camp. However, after we began erecting tents, the faction expelled us. People originally from Damascus were expelled from four villages only days after the earthquake. This expulsion affected everyone, not just women leaders... They gave us three days to evacuate, and we complied. However, all the supplies we brought were left behind and subsequently stolen by the faction. This faction prohibits any entry into Jenderes and its countryside without claiming a share or exerting control over the distribution of goods and services.” (Syria, Afrin)



“The de facto authorities [and affiliated armed groups] in Idlib interfered with anything that happened on the ground. They were obstructing the work of the organisations. Everyone needed to obtain approvals. There was an obstruction to many actions and aid that could’ve been provided. Although they opened the crossings between the regions to Jenderes³⁹ and Idlib, many volunteer teams faced restrictions to their work, and the women’s movement with teams was obstructed.” (Syria, Idlib)

4-2-1-4) Financial Constraints and Resourcing Challenges

The challenge of transferring funds to and within Syria, especially for development and civil society organisations, emerged as another formidable obstacle that is intricately linked with existing sanctions and geopolitical dynamics. The situation was already strained before the earthquake, but the disaster further intensified these difficulties, exacerbating the challenges in delivering crucial aid and assistance.

These financial challenges have been particularly acute in opposition-controlled northwest Syria, which was also the area most affected by the earthquake. Here, the situation is further complicated by differing policies of donors and the varied control of the region by different groups. Organisations, especially those with headquarters in Europe, frequently encounter difficulties in

sending money to their teams in opposition-held areas in Syria due to sanctions and banking restrictions. This impacts their ability to execute activities and provide support within the country. Additionally, the preferences and restrictions of donors play a role; some are reluctant to fund projects in areas controlled by certain groups, such as Turkish-controlled zones or areas under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Salvation Government.⁴⁰ In these areas, local authorities also impose their own restrictions. For instance, organisations operating in regions controlled by HTS are required to register, declare all their activities and pay taxes. These conditions, coupled with the risk of investigation or arrest for individuals and entities receiving substantial funds, create a complex environment for aid and development work.

“In recent times, funding has been limited for Syria, which has had a negative impact on the people inside the country. Sending remittances has become challenging, even for organisations operating in the region, making it difficult for them to deliver transfers to individuals. This situation has had a detrimental effect, exacerbated by existing restrictions and governmental authorities. With limited funding and a lack of funded initiatives, a workaround to this issue was found through unclear transfers. For example, instead of sending a large sum of money, it was divided into several parts and sent through multiple remittance offices. This approach was adopted in different areas depending on their control, but it also posed security challenges.” (Syria, Jenderes)

The challenges of securing financial resources and ensuring sustainability are especially pronounced for small organisations, and were also evident post-earthquake. One earthquake survivor from Idlib recounted that *“The Gaziantep hub [coordinating operations in northwest Syria] was affected. Organisations whose headquarters were in Gaziantep were paralysed and the centralisation of decisions led to the lack of urgent action in Syria and delayed decisions to open and use aid in their storages in Syria. This led to delays in making decisions from within Syria and delayed the distribution of aid from centres within Syria to those affected.”*

40 In 2017, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which is under the influence of the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), was formed to administer the region, outside the Syrian regime control (northwestern part of Idlib province as well as small parts of the surrounding provinces of Aleppo, Latakia and Hama) <https://www.ecoi.net/en/countries/syrian-arab-republic/briefing/>

Restrictions on money transfers also extend beyond opposition-held regions. In areas controlled by the Syrian regime, individuals and organisations still encounter considerable challenges in receiving funds, alongside significant risks such as interrogations or arrests. Following the earthquake, there have been [reports of intense scrutiny regarding the source, destination, and usage of funds](#), adding to the complexities and risks associated with financial transactions in these regions.

“There was some questioning regarding the source of the donations, and there was an incident in which a certain amount of money was received to buy diesel, and there was scrutiny about where the money came from, where it went, and how it was used. In this incident, there were security interventions.”
(Syria, Aleppo)

The financial landscape, complicated by stringent adherence to sanctions, has rendered fund transfers precarious and curtailed contributions to earthquake relief efforts both in opposition- and regime- controlled regions. Sanctions have for long severely impacted the operations of organisations in Syria, with the primary issue being the difficulty in transferring and receiving funds. Compliance with banking procedures, prioritised by NGOs to deliver assistance, hinders their ability to respond effectively to emergencies. This has led to a focus on humanitarian activities in less restricted areas, potentially excluding marginalised and high-risk regions from support. Moreover, banking transactions involving Syria often face severe delays or cancellation, adversely affecting the daily activities of organisations operating in or on Syria (IMPACT, 2020⁴¹).

In the aftermath of the earthquake, sanctions imposed on Syria have played out in various ways, leading to complex political and humanitarian dynamics. The Syrian regime used these sanctions as a pretext, claiming they hindered their ability to facilitate aid delivery, thus contributing to delays in providing necessary assistance. A civil activist from Idlib recounted, *“The Syrian regime claimed that economic sanctions prevented them from facilitating the entry of aid, leading to decision-making delays and hindered aid distribution within Syria.”* Moreover, both in the immediate aftermath and in the longer term response, the regime leveraged the earthquake to its benefit, leading to the easing of or circumventing long-standing sanctions and further normalisation of ties between various governments and the regime. Notably, three months after the earthquake, Syria was reinstated into the Arab League.

41 IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development e.V. Joseph Daher, 2020. Invisible Sanctions: How over-compliance limits humanitarian work on Syria Challenges of Fund Transfer for Non-Profit Organizations Working on Syria. https://impact-csrd.org/reports/Invisible_Sanctions_IMPACT_EN.pdf

In sum, financial constraints presented a dual challenge: firstly, transferring funds has become a convoluted process due to strict regulations and compliance measures, causing bureaucracy that slows down financial transactions needed for rapid disaster response. Secondly, these constraints hindered the flow of international aid to local organisations and initiatives on the ground. Women-led organisations and other Syrian civil society actors faced difficulties in receiving essential financial support from international donors, hampering their ability to implement response and recovery work. Small local women-led organisations and grassroots initiatives were particularly affected, as they have limited access to contingency funds and lack donor flexibility for grant reallocation (Jelnar Ahmad, 2023⁴²). Additionally, donor requirements, paperwork and lengthy processes further burden these already stretched women-led organisations.

Given the constraints of limited financial resources and a notable absence of significant external support, the initial response to the crisis was heavily dependent on the altruistic contributions and endeavours of individual volunteers. This approach, while driven by goodwill and determination, carried with it an inherent challenge: it was marked by unpredictability and inconsistency.



“Each volunteer contributed a specific amount, and we gathered these contributions to acquire food and essential supplies for the residents. Sometimes the food reached the residents, and at other times, it didn’t. We had to go from one location to another, hoping to find surplus supplies to bring to the residents. It was quite challenging.” (Syria, Aleppo)

4-2-2) THE TURKISH SIDE OF THE STORY: POLITICAL INFLUENCES AT PLAY

Syrians residing in Turkey faced their fair share of challenges amidst the earthquake, revealing a complex interplay of political dynamics, including discrimination, bureaucratic obstacles and gendered challenges.

The extent of politicisation appeared to vary based on individual experiences. One witness who lived through the crisis in Turkey noted, *“I didn’t witness politicisation or favouritism between Syrians and Turks. Aid was dispensed by organisations based on the type of help required, and the centres were open to all. What I saw were individual behaviours rather than systematic policy.”* However, another participant emphasised that *“The Turkish agencies [and relief teams] generally gave precedence to assisting their own citizens first. Citizens of other countries, like Syrians, were often regarded as secondary when it came to receiving aid.”*

Regardless of who was responsible or their intentions, first-hand accounts reveal several instances of politicised manoeuvring in rescue operations, aid distribution and access to services. This situation was further compounded by an escalation of hate speech and widespread negative sentiment against Syrians in Turkey.



“In Turkish areas, there was never a fair distribution of aid. Also, the priority was given to Turkish citizens, and was very neglectful of the Syrians, to the point that there were Syrian people trying to look for their families under the rubble, and they accused them of stealing, and of looking for money.” (Syrian civil activist in Idlib, working for an organisation operating in Syria and Turkey)

Rescue operations and recovery efforts in the areas affected by the earthquake exposed profound disparities and challenges, particularly for Syrian refugees. Eyewitness accounts raised concerns that rescue teams, upon identifying the ethnicity or nationality of those trapped under the rubble, might have shifted their priorities, leading to a concerning disparity in the treatment of victims. Moreover, rescue operations for **Syrians trapped beneath the rubble were not given the same level of priority or urgency** as those for others, particularly Turkish nationals.



“I mean, in Turkey when rescue teams were coming to the area, they were rescuing people, they would hear that the people there were supposedly Arabs or Kurds, so the rescue groups were saying let them, these Syrians. Leave them, let us rescue the Turks first, then save the Syrians.” (Turkey)

This discriminatory attitude seems to have persisted along with aid distribution after the immediate crisis. A Syrian mother living in Gaziantep noted that at the beginning of the disaster, there was no differentiation in aid distribution, as the shock and fear of the catastrophe prevailed. However, a few days after the disaster, signs of discrimination emerged. Access for Syrian women became particularly challenging, as Syrian women refugees have less opportunity to learn the language; they are also easier to identify as Syrians due to their hijabs (as the Syrian way of head covering is different than the Turkish way). One participant residing in a refugee camp in Turkey elaborated on these challenges:



“The worst part was that we [women] needed special services, for example, bathrooms for women. One of the situations I remember is that there was a cut of water for two days, so the condition of the bathrooms became miserable in the mosque we sheltered in. When the water finally came, aid employees told us that they cannot clean it. Even feminine things [pads] were scattered on the ground. When no one took the initiative, we gathered a volunteer team, and we went to each family. I speak very good Turkish, and told them that we need to clean the bathrooms, and we want a woman from every family to volunteer... Frankly, they started telling us that you [Syrians] caused that mess and the dirty bathrooms. The best option we had is that we carried out the cleaning work ourselves”. (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“Discrimination manifested in the form of differential treatment in aid distribution between native residents and Syrians, both men and women. This differentiation extended to the distribution of new clothing, which was prioritised for citizens over Syrians, regardless of their gender. The same applied to tents, as their availability was insufficient, and the priority for aid was given to native residents at the expense of Syrian men and women.”
(Turkey, Gaziantep)

The struggles of Syrians in Turkey in the aftermath of the earthquake in regions like Antakya and Gaziantep, extended beyond mere aid distribution to encompass broader challenges in [accessing essential services](#). This situation was further complicated by [legal and bureaucratic hurdles](#), since engaging with government services became increasingly difficult, as nearly every process necessitated a valid residence or travel permit — a requirement that became even more challenging for Syrians in the earthquake’s aftermath.

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“In the earthquake’s wake, the devastation was profound, with only about 10% of houses left standing and the majority destroyed or severely damaged. This led to the displacement of survivors to Gaziantep and surrounding areas, where they faced numerous hardships. Syrians, in particular, were required to obtain travel permits valid for three months, with the possibility of extension. However, many faced unwelcoming attitudes and were often forced to return to their original regions, which lacked basic health care facilities. In these areas, medical care was provided through small, ill-equipped cabins instead of fully functional medical centres or hospitals.” (Southern Turkey)

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the rise of [racism and discrimination against Syrians in Turkey](#) further complicated the situation. Syrian refugees in Turkey who shared their insights with us highlighted how this discrimination had a tangible impact on the complex and politicised environment faced by Syrians.

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“The earthquake crisis led to an escalation in hate speech. This was evident in the increased rental prices and reluctance to rent houses to Syrians, due to the large number of civilian homes affected by the earthquake, resulting in a shortage of available houses. Additionally, the phenomenon of evicting Syrian tenants under the pretext of selling the house or for the landlord’s personal use became widespread after the earthquake.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

The language barrier also emerged as a key aspect, with foreigners who speak the Turkish language having better access to aid. This [linguistic discrimination](#) added an additional layer of complexity, aggravating the vulnerabilities faced by Syrian refugees and creating a tiered system that impeded their access to crucial resources.

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“Those who spoke Turkish could communicate more effectively with the rescue and aid teams. However, when it was noticed that someone was of a different nationality or from another country, issues of politicisation arose, leading to delays in addressing their needs. There was also a general negative perception among Turks towards Syrians.” (Southern Turkey)

The escalation of racism and hate speech against Syrians in Turkey creates a concerning factor, emphasising the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these deeply rooted issues.



In sum, the politicisation observed post-earthquake in Syria and Turkey serve as a stark reminder of the broader issues at play in conflict zones, where political control intertwines with humanitarian response. The disparities witnessed raise critical questions about the accessibility and neutrality of aid efforts in regions marked by political strife. This inequality not only affects the efficacy of immediate disaster response but also has lasting repercussions on the resilience of communities grappling with the aftermath of both the earthquake and pre-existing conflicts.

4-3) RECOGNISING INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN DISASTER RESPONSE AND BEYOND

In the context of the earthquake, the pivotal role of women's leadership is undeniable. Despite being disproportionately affected by the earthquake, individual women, as well as women-centred and women-led organisations, stood out as exceptionally dynamic, proactive and impactful in their response (Ahmad, 2023⁴³). Moreover, the earthquake underscored the unique challenges and strengths of women-led organisations and women leaders, who had already endured the difficulties of a prolonged 12-year conflict in Syria.

4-3-1) UNSUNG HEROINES: WOMEN LEADERS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

First-hand testimonies gathered from Syrian women residing in Syria and Turkey provided profound insights into the individual, collective and institutional dimensions of women's roles, underscoring their unique and indispensable contributions to disaster response and recovery.

At the individual level, women emerged as unsung heroines, exemplifying altruism and community solidarity. Regardless of their backgrounds, many women volunteered tirelessly to assist those affected by the earthquake, even as they themselves were dealing with its consequences. Their involvement ranged from providing essential material support to offering moral and emotional support to individuals struggling in the aftermath, as well as providing overlooked services and specific needs to women.

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“In Gaziantep, individual efforts by women who had an impact by virtue of being volunteers or within certain groups, regardless of affiliation, appeared to a large extent. They worked extensively on securing families who came from outside Gaziantep, securing sums of money. Even if they spoke the Turkish language, they were present in the field to translate or communicate.”

(Turkey, Gaziantep)

“Many women were significantly affected, and they were still actively engaged, whether in their professional roles or by leading their own initiatives with friends or neighbours.” **(Turkey, Gaziantep)**

“From the early hours of the earthquake, we descended to the shelters in schools, mosques and even squares due to the limited capacity of the shelters. The situation was tragic, but when I saw people like this, they gave me strength, and I forgot about myself and my family who had come out of our shattered house to help people and fulfil their needs in those first moments.” **(Syria, Aleppo)**

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“One woman was travelling for work during the earthquake, and her house collapsed on her husband. Thankfully, he recovered, but the impact of the earthquake and fear left him traumatised. However, as she was a civil activist, she gathered women and worked on collecting donations and financial support from various countries to buy essentials for women and clothes for children. Thanks to her work with the women, she was able to find support for those in need. She served as a role model for them and was able to overcome challenges, fear and need.” **(Turkey, Gaziantep)**

Women also coalesced into collective entities, forming grassroots spontaneous efforts, volunteer groups and initiatives that mirrored the collaborative strength of community-driven responses. These groups became focal points for generating ideas, pooling resources and implementing targeted interventions.

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“Many WhatsApp groups were highly active, led by a group of individuals, and these women were truly like shuttles available 24 hours a day to receive calls. In one group, many girls, or most of the girls present in Gaziantep, formed strong connections among the people.” **(Turkey, Gaziantep)**

Women's leadership further extended to the institutional level, with many actively engaged in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society bodies responding to the earthquake. As some have already been engaged in humanitarian efforts in some of the affected areas, they were quick to respond and assist. Others capitalised on their presence and knowledge of the context to provide tailored and specific responses that were sensitive to women's needs. They worked separately and together to provide an example of tailored and flexible feminist resourcing and aid.

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“There were organisations that were already involved in relief work in these areas and had dedicated funding for relief efforts. The response from these small initiatives was faster and more effective, especially in the early stages.” **(Turkey, Gaziantep)**

“As for our organisation and several volunteer teams operating inside Syria, we were working on various tasks, and there was significant collaboration between the teams. At first, we focused on rapid response without much time for organisation. Later, needs assessments were conducted, and aid was distributed to diverse areas. The needs assessment also considered women's needs.” **(Syria, Afrin)**

“Our network began contacting a new donor on the fourth day after the earthquake struck. We worked on an aid project with a good budget, and we focused on providing comprehensive aid packages, including food, hygiene items, blankets and women's necessities, especially in Gaziantep, Urfa and Antakya. About 95% of the project's workforce was women, with 66 volunteers in addition to the core team. Other activities were suspended, and efforts were concentrated in the relief and women's sectors.” **(Turkey, Gaziantep)**



4-3-2) SETTING AN EXAMPLE: WOMEN LEADING A HOLISTIC AND INCLUSIVE RESPONSE

Women leaders broadened response priorities, moving away from the traditionally male-dominated emphasis on logistical and technical response aspects, to adopt a more holistic approach. Demonstrating exceptional adaptability and resilience, they not only addressed immediate needs but also catered to the complex requirements of diverse groups. Drawing on knowledge from years of war and conflict, these leaders employed a **feminist holistic strategy** to aid those in need, **effectively transcending internal tensions and discrimination**.

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“During the Syrian crisis that Syrians have gone through, there has been a kind of learning about how we can face any disaster that befalls us.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“When the earthquake occurred, we relied solely on our instinctual awareness. The fear we experienced formed our first conscious shock, prompting us to help each other. This revealed the reality that Syrians, regardless of their geographical location, share a collective system of societal values.” (Syria, Lattakia)

“We directly approached the families we were working with through our Association, who were among those affected. Especially since we were working in more marginalised areas of Gaziantep, where living conditions are quite basic. The distribution of aid was primarily directed towards Syrians, and specifically to the camps of displaced persons.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)



The sustained engagement of women-led organisations during the long conflict and their sensitive approach to crisis response furthered their awareness of the vulnerabilities that often go unnoticed in crisis situations. The **nuanced understanding of the intersectional challenges** faced by women and marginalised groups allowed them to focus on frequently neglected issues in crisis responses, such as the special needs of women, and aiding women journalists and first responders.

“When humanitarian disasters occur, the emphasis is often on food aid. So, we focused specifically on aid related to women’s needs. We directed our efforts towards providing special packages for women, including menstrual hygiene products and other necessities related to the menstrual cycle.”

(Turkey, Gaziantep)

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“As part of our response, we, as women, focused on providing for children. We offered them bags containing clothes, shoes, possibly toys, stationery, along with some gifts. In addition to these, we conducted sessions and activities for children, coupled with caregiving services. We also provided psychological support sessions. Furthermore, we had a special protection package for girls, adolescents and women, which included clothing, shoes and other specific necessities for women.” (Syria, northwest)

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“We were working on two fronts simultaneously: first, to support our affected team, and second, to focus on supporting women journalists and women human rights defenders. Our standing protection program provides support, but this time the needs were immense. Therefore, on the second day of the earthquake, we began reaching out to donors and coordinating with institutions. To assist women journalists and human rights defenders, we published a form on our social media pages to assess their needs, and we provided small emergency grants to aid them during the initial period. We conducted an emergency response program for two months, assisting 79 women journalists and human rights defenders. We were the sole organisations responding to this group” (Syrian activist based in France, and working with a feminist organisation operating in Turkey and Syria)

A noteworthy aspect was how **women-led groups focused on psychological support from the very early phases of the disaster**. Through individual and group psychological support sessions, women leaders created safe spaces for survivors to navigate the trauma and grief induced by the earthquake. Concurrently, recreational activities for children served as therapeutic outlets, offering not only respite from immediate challenges but also fostering a sense of normalcy in the midst of crisis.

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“During the initial phase of our response to the earthquake disaster, we provided psychological support sessions for women, as well as sessions and activities for children. We also assessed the needs of women and children in shelter centres. Additionally, we had a case management department that observed the psychological conditions of children affected by the earthquake. So, in the first few days, our work was primarily focused on conducting sessions for children and caregivers, specifically for women.”
(Syria, northwest)

“Our response was after only a few days. We began working in shelter centres with the people whose homes were demolished. Our response was only to provide psychological support and listen to these mothers. We provided psychological support sessions for women and also sessions for children.”
(Syria, northwest)

The acts of solidarity demonstrated by women leaders and first responders fostered larger community resilience and solidarity. Their grassroots efforts highlighted an inherent commitment to aiding their communities during crises. These efforts transcended internal tensions or discrimination, providing support to vulnerable individuals and showcasing adaptability and resilience both in Syria and Turkey. They also helped bridge the gaps created by the different control authorities and by the conflict, and created a sense of understanding and solidarity among Syrians.

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“Women leaders displayed extraordinary resilience and adaptability. While certain organisations faced substantial challenges and were forced to consider closure, others showcased a remarkable level of flexibility and adaptability. They absorbed the impact, swiftly rebounded and resumed their services in various geographic regions.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“We launched the ‘People Helping Each Other’ initiative. People started coming from different areas, such as Marash, Hatay, Nurdağı ... These people arrived without blankets or spare clothes, only with the clothes they were wearing, along with children, women and elderly. They had many vulnerabilities, and as locals, it was our responsibility to support them and understand their needs. So, on a small scale, we initiated the ‘People Helping Each Other’ campaign, which aimed to utilise the resources within the community to help those in need.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)



“During my volunteer work with the Gaziantep Municipality, there were 77 Turkish young men and women, and two Syrian young men, and myself. The municipal official in charge was also present, and when he learned that we were Syrians without Turkish citizenship, he praised us and spoke highly of the matter. Since then, he has been in personal contact with us, inquiring about our needs, and expressing his hope that we can serve as role models for both Syrian and Turkish youth.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

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“There was an exchange of clothes because most people fled with light home clothes. The women who had more than one piece would donate to others, and the women who were not injured in the earthquake helped others who were injured with simple first aid. When we were transferred to the hospital, there were efforts from people from outside the hospital who had experience in nursing and other medical matters.” (Syria, Jenderes)

“We were not affected by the earthquake, but as women civil society actors in Qamishli, we started gathering donations to send to the affected areas and we launched psychological support sessions.” (Syria, Qamishli)

“We are a volunteer team of young men and women from diverse regions studying in Tishreen University. Our work was intellectual, not relief and humanitarian, but the disaster that occurred in Latakia forced us all to be present to support and help each other. All our efforts were transformed to make the local community be supportive of each other, especially at the beginning of the earthquake disaster, due to the lack of support except from the local community. We turned to communicating with relatives, family and friends to collect donations and direct them to the host areas and their people, which are already suffering from poverty. However, they had to respond and receive displaced people [from affected areas], so we tried to support them along with the people who were displaced to shelters. In shelters, some girls and young women may be shy and couldn’t talk directly to people managing there [mainly men], so they would get our numbers and contact us to meet their specific needs, which they could not ask for out of shyness.” (Syria, Lattakia)

Women’s collective efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake highlighted their skills in organising and executing impactful initiatives that addressed immediate and long-term challenges. These women-led actions emphasised community-driven solutions, challenging traditional hierarchies and setting a precedent for inclusive, collaborative disaster response strategies.

4-3-3) EMPOWERING VOICES: WOMEN LEADERS BECAME ACTIVE ADVOCATES AND CONNECTORS

Women leaders and women’s organisations played a crucial role in disseminating information, raising awareness and fostering spaces for dialogue and understanding. Utilising their roles as community connectors and leveraging their presence on social media platforms, these leaders became essential channels for critical information, advocates for the necessities and concerns of vulnerable populations and amplifiers of the frequently overlooked voices of women during the earthquake crisis.

Women leaders, cognisant of the fractures caused by the earthquake, actively engaged in building bridges between affected communities, official bodies and non-governmental organisations. Their initiatives focused on enhancing communication channels, fostering dialogue, and nurturing trust among different stakeholders. Recognising that effective communication is fundamental to a coordinated response, women-led organisations strategically navigated through the complexities of post-earthquake dynamics to ensure that vital information flowed seamlessly. Some participants also shared that some women volunteers and leaders helped in the translation and coordination with Turkish relief teams.



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“There was an initiative by rights advocates and a group of organisations to communicate and coordinate with the local council and authorities in the area to prevent the exploitation of the disaster by individuals who do not own properties but seek control over properties that are not theirs.” (Syria, Jenderes)

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“In the beginning, the Turkish government or Turkish organisations were responsible for securing food for those affected in the mosques, so the role of the [Syrian] organisations was to provide [and guide people to] shelter or transportation. Largely the individual efforts of women had an impact as they had experience of being volunteers or within certain groups. They worked extensively on securing families who came from outside Gaziantep, securing sums of money, even helping and assisting those who don't speak the Turkish language. They were present in the field or by phone.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

“Without the work and advocacy done by women activists and women-led organisations I believe no one would have noticed women's needs. They communicated those needs and challenges to relief teams.” (Syria, Salqin)

The strategic use of media also emerged as a powerful tool in the hands of women-led organisations, some of which launched advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about the conditions and challenges faced by women amidst the disastrous situation. Social media platforms became canvases for spreading campaigns that highlighted the needs and challenges of women, and the emergency situation in northwest Syria. Women-led organisations engaged in a dual-pronged approach, intertwining advocacy for the rights and challenges of women with a broader campaign to inform the public about the post-earthquake scenario. This intersectional focus, coupling gender-specific concerns with the broader context of disaster aftermath, showcased the nuanced understanding that women leaders brought to their communication and advocacy initiatives.

“If I want to think positively, this is the first time that something has happened that makes women raise their voices more than ever before regarding gender equality.” (Syria, Idleb)

Women-led organisations also used advocacy campaigns to actively empower affected communities with knowledge and information. These awareness activities addressed a spectrum of concerns, from basic hygiene to understanding the psychological impacts of the earthquake.

“The advocacy campaigns were beneficial. When we called for advocacy related to the issue of sexual exploitation of women during disasters, the media started circulating this term and raised awareness about the issue. Thus, our advocacy efforts did not remain limited but extended to the media, which alerted and discussed what to do in such situations, whom to turn to. Our page received cases related to harassment and sexual exploitation of women during the earthquake, and it was our responsibility to raise awareness. The advocacy campaigns were effective in spreading the term and raising awareness.” (Syria, Damascus)



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“I was one of the participants in an advocacy campaign, focusing on the psychological impact and the need for safe spaces for women. It was important to continue with sessions set by specialists addressing psychological damage.” (Northwest Syria, Aazaz)

“The advocacy campaign carried out by our foundation, named ‘My Period is Not a Source of Shame’, focused on the hate speech directed towards women during menstruation amid the earthquake. The latter had significant psychological repercussions on women. It prevented some women from seeking shelter and support in certain religious places.” (Syria, Damascus)

Advocacy campaigns also focused on the conditions and challenges of women journalists after the earthquake, highlighting the indispensable role of women journalists in reporting events and amplifying the voices of the people, but also the double burden they bore as victims of the earthquake, caregivers of their families and journalists whose duty was to cover stories and spread the word.

“Together with the emergency response, we launched an advocacy campaign on our social media pages, to support female journalists who were conveying their own situations while simultaneously amplifying the voices of the people.” (Syrian activist based in France, and working with a feminist organisation operating in Turkey and Syria)

Besides awareness and support campaigns, some advocacy campaigns launched in the aftermath of the earthquake illuminated the intersecting challenges confronting Syrians. They highlighted how the earthquake compounded the existing challenges of conflict and displacement and aimed to prevent viewing this humanitarian crisis as an isolated incident, emphasising the importance of recognising the root causes and long-term implications.

“We also launched the Green Vest campaign, shedding light on the plight of Syrians. One particular incident caught our attention on social media: a young girl wearing a green sweater with ‘Unknown Identity’ written on it; you might have seen it. Syrians had already been suffering from the conflict; and the earthquake only added to their suffering. Through this awareness campaign, we conveyed visual messages targeting all segments of society within Syria and Turkey. Children, women, men, and persons with disability who were emerging from the rubble of the earthquake, we shared their stories through our social media page; and they garnered significant engagement. The impact was profound; many notable figures also engaged and sent messages for us to publish.”

(Turkey, Gaziantep)

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4-3-4) CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN ACTIVISTS, LEADERS AND WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS

In the aftermath of the earthquake, women-led organisations, activists and first responders grappled with psychological stress, logistical difficulties and societal challenges, underscoring the complex challenges facing women in crisis response situations.

4-3-4-1) Emotional, Mental and Psychological Toll

The earthquake took a significant psychological toll on women leading the response efforts. As primary caregivers, they were confronted with a dual challenge: *managing immediate humanitarian needs and their duties to teams and communities*, all while coping with their own trauma and the physical aftermath of the earthquake.



“As women, we often feel this internal sense of responsibility, thinking, ‘How can I just sit here and do nothing?’ Due to my personal pain and responsibility for two children while their father is not present, and given my son’s specific health condition, I have connections with women in similar situations. Subconsciously, I found myself reaching out to women whose husbands are absent or widows, with children facing specific psychological situations because I knew the burden would be doubled for them.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

For women leaders, the pressing need for a rapid response often conflicted with their personal recovery needs, resulting in a psychological struggle.

“During the first earthquake, it was a dual challenge: being part of a family and part of a team. I had to protect my children, and simultaneously communicate with employees due to my work in multiple locations. This was a challenge for me in terms of how to separate myself from the tragedy and fear I was experiencing and fulfil my responsibilities towards my children and work staff.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

The struggle to balance responsibilities was particularly evident for women with children. The earthquake added complexity, making it challenging to leave children at home while engaging in relief work or volunteering. Some women brought their children along during fieldwork and aid distribution. However, ensuring their children’s safety amid the crisis added an emotional burden to these women’s leadership roles.



“As a mother of two, it was impossible for me to leave my children at home and go out, whether for work, volunteering or anything else. Having my children with me was never easy, and I’ve seen many women who are actively working on the ground with their children present.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

In addition to the impact on women leaders, the psychological toll on women first responders, including *journalists and humanitarian workers*, often went unrecognised. The earthquake blurred the boundaries between their professional responsibilities and personal vulnerabilities, highlighting the delicate balance that these individuals had to uphold amidst the disaster. As one journalist who recounted her experience during the earthquake expressed, *“During the earthquake, I had to remain on air all day. I needed to stay composed as I didn’t have the luxury of sympathising with people ... I had to maintain personal psychological equilibrium while boosting the morale of the people I spoke to on the phone. I had to coordinate humanitarian aid and special needs for women. This was exhausting and took a toll on my psychological well-being. After a month of coverage, I experienced physical and psychological distress. Nobody asked how journalists and reporters were affected by the earthquake. As journalists and reporters, we are expected to cover events while maintaining composure and balance, without showing emotions.”*

Similarly, a humanitarian responder who was in Turkey post-earthquake shared her experience, saying, *“During the distribution of food baskets or other items, I often heard painful stories from the recipients. This, in turn, placed a mental burden on me at that time. I had to continue my work with all my strength, even though I might be emotionally drained inside. But I had to hide this from them.”*

The impact was not confined geographically; women-led organisations in non-affected areas and even in other countries also experienced psychological repercussions among their staff, showing solidarity with varying degrees of involvement in the earthquake response. While they were facing their own psychological burdens due to the earthquake, women in France and Istanbul also recounted how they were there for all those who needed them in affected areas to alleviate their own psychological burdens.

In sum, the emotional impact on women responders and leaders was intense, encompassing shock, grief, resilience and determination. Many acknowledged feeling internally exhausted but chose to hide it, opting to appear strong for their teams and communities.

4-3-4-2) Logistical, Bureaucratic and Social Barriers

The earthquake response also brought to the forefront a series of logistical, bureaucratic and societal challenges that disproportionately affected women actively engaged in relief efforts. These challenges were often deeply rooted in gender dynamics and societal norms.

Travel and movement were significant challenges for women responders, particularly when operating in areas beyond their regular locations. The expansion of relief efforts into new geographical areas introduced various challenges, including safety issues and societal expectations that constrained women's mobility and substantially limited their active involvement in decision-making, thereby impacting the gender sensitivity of aid operations.



"The issue of travel posed significant challenges for women. Accommodations were in the open, in tents where a large group of staff was present. Some women wanted to go out, but the circumstances made it very difficult. There wasn't a safe place for them to stay, sleep or secure their personal needs." (Turkey, Gaziantep)

"In the areas of the Salvation Government, the government recognised the efforts of civil society and facilitated the work of teams and organisations, but there remained complications and restrictions in movement and transportation if there were women in the team and if there were mixed groups (men and women)." (Syria, Salqin)

"Most relief teams included women, some of them were mainly women teams but they needed to be accompanied by men for protection while moving between areas and neighbourhoods." (Syria, Afrin)

"Women were present, actively working, and new leaders emerged on the scene. However, when we look at the numbers, men still dominate. The number of women leaders, although commendable, is small compared to the number of men leading initiatives, organisations or events. The predominance of men in decision-making roles stems from deep-rooted societal norms. For instance, there are limitations on women's movement and travel; it's often not accepted for women to move alone or be in certain areas by themselves. There's also a fear associated with women returning home late. As a result, the involvement of women remains constrained. In relief organisations, the presence of women has been limited and continues to be so. Employment for women has increased in areas like home visits, which are more socially accepted, but overall, societal norms continue to restrict the variety of roles available to women." (Turkey, Gaziantep)

The presence of controlling military factions in certain areas within Syria further complicated logistical operations. Instances were recounted where women-led initiatives were prevented from working or were expelled from certain areas by military factions seeking control or imposing conditions. This dynamic not only hindered the efficacy of relief operations but also highlighted the gendered dimensions of power dynamics in crisis settings.

Women journalists also faced multiple challenges both in north-western Syria and in Turkey. They experienced harassment, threats and violence that hindered their work and coverage of events. As a journalist based in Idlib shared, *"Female journalists often encountered more constraints in their work and faced greater security threats compared to male journalists. Sometimes, violence was used to expel or prevent female journalists from covering events ... This issue has been discussed in north-western Syria and also in Turkey. However, it is more prevalent in north-western Syria, where security threats and constraints on female journalists are more significant. One journalist in north-western Syria was threatened that her equipment would be destroyed if she did not leave."*

In Turkey, women leaders and organisations focusing on women encountered unique challenges arising from bureaucratic and legal constraints, as well as intimidation and threats. One participant shared an incident where they communicated with a family that met the conditions for aid basket distributions, which required the breadwinner to be a woman. However, the family's breadwinner, a man, contacted them instead. *"We informed him that the assistance was exclusively for families without the breadwinner, and we apologised to him. He explicitly threatened us with deportation and complaints, accusing us of fraud, stating that it would be our last day in Turkey, among other things. Of course, it was just talk, and I don't know if others have experienced the same thing, which we might consider as harassment."*

Moreover, some Syrian organisations opted not to engage in a required protocol with a Turkish governmental body, which was required for any humanitarian response. This decision was due to several reasons, one of which was the knowledge that major projects on the ground were primarily directed towards Turkish citizens rather than Syrians. Consequently, they operated illegally, facing limitations in movement and enduring significant risks. Although this issue was not exclusive to women's organisations, they encountered their own set of challenges in this context.



"We were confident that signing the protocol would not grant us decision-making powers or any involvement in determining the list of beneficiaries. Taking this risk was no easy task. For example, transporting a vehicle loaded with specific materials from one city to another was consistently challenging. However, fully aware of families in desperate need, and being Syrians ourselves, we knew that some had received no aid whatsoever. Consequently, we felt compelled to take action, and fortunately, no negative incidents occurred." (Turkey, Gaziantep)

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“Even community-based campaigns, if not managed by The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (Turkish: Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, also abbreviated as AFAD), faced numerous obstacles and operated outside the legal framework. Unauthorised gatherings led by individuals without work permits or official employee status were subject to pressure, potentially resulting in detention or deportation. Initially overlooked, the situation escalated after approximately a month, making movement and vehicle transport between cities increasingly challenging. Significant restrictions were imposed in this respect.” (Turkey, Gaziantep)

In sum, the consistent involvement of women-led organisations throughout the conflict, coupled with their holistic approach to crisis management, smoothly transitioned into their response to the earthquake, exhibiting adaptability, resilience and transformative leadership. Women’s contributions were crucial, not only in addressing immediate needs but also in shaping public discourse, raising awareness and providing vital social and psychological support. Their strategic initiatives focused on the long-term well-being and resilience of the affected communities, while also addressing the often-neglected needs of different community members and marginalised groups. However, they also confronted significant challenges deeply rooted in gender, political and social dynamics in Syria and Turkey. This underscores the importance of paying greater attention to the needs and situations of women leaders and activists in disaster contexts.

5

MOVING FORWARD: KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



The experiences of women in Syria and Turkey reveal a complex array of challenges and heroism often overlooked in the aftermath of disasters. These accounts provide a deep understanding of the impact's severity and the shortcomings in response efforts. Additionally, they offer valuable insights for shaping recommendations.

This chapter synthesises insights and recommendations, derived from the collective experiences and deliberations of resilient women who endured the disaster and/or played pivotal roles in the aftermath of the earthquakes. The following recommendations are not merely theoretical constructs; they are the distilled wisdom of those who navigated the complexities of disaster response on the ground. They aim to enhance future feminist, gender-sensitive disaster response strategies, taking into account the nuances of conflict situations.

While these recommendations are rooted in the experiences and insights of the women whose voices are highlighted in this report, they are broad in nature and will require implementation approaches customised to the needs, size and resources of the individual organisations that seek to apply them. It should also be noted that not all recommendations will apply to every organisation.

Recommendations to International Donors and Donor States

FINANCING

Long-term: Provide **flexible, long-term funding** to women-led and small local organisations, including funding for core, contingency and overhead costs. Such funding should not only be allocated for projects and activities but also for these groups to enhance their institutional capacities. The aftermath of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria emphasised the importance of supporting these organisations to sustain their operations, enabling them to respond promptly and effectively to crises and disasters as they unfold.

Accessible: Develop **gender-responsive funding mechanisms** tailored to address the unique challenges faced by Syrian women-led organisations. This includes allocating funds to programmes specifically targeting the intersectional challenges faced by Syrian women, such as initiatives focused on the distinct needs of female journalists, first responders, women human rights defenders and marginalised groups.

Flexible: To ensure adaptability to the Syrian context, **funding for programmes** related to Syria should demonstrate an adequate degree of **flexibility**, accommodating the shifting political and security dynamics in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and other host countries. This flexibility should extend to grassroots organisations operating in challenging and conflict situations, such as the Syrian context, considering their distinct needs and constraints. For example, given the dynamic and unpredictable nature of crises, bureaucratic and lengthy procedures for approving budget reallocation requests should be waived during crises to ensure the timely delivery of much-needed assistance.

Targeted: Allocate **relief funds to women-led initiatives and organisations** in recognition of the unique challenges they face, as well as their strategic placement within communities to provide gender-sensitive and context-specific response in conflict contexts like Syria during disaster response. Additionally, allocate accessible emergency funding to support these organisations in addressing their teams' needs, including emergency relocation and medical and psychological needs.

Sustainability: Support the **sustainability and growth of youth groups and women-led initiatives**, which in the Syrian context were the first line of response for the earthquake and continue to work on long-term recovery. Implement long-term capacity-building programmes, provide resources for skill development and establish networks to foster and strengthen collaboration among them. By investing in these initiatives, there is an opportunity to promote and sustain long-term recovery.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND FULL, EQUAL AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION ACROSS PEACE, SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN SECTORS

Consult and engage: Engage the affected local community, particularly women-led initiatives and women leaders, to **understand the different needs and priorities on the ground** and respond to them. Women led groups and initiatives as well as women community leaders should be better and more meaningfully engaged in coordination and planning of emergency response.

Document lessons learned: Support the **documentation of experiences**, with a particular focus on the leadership that emerged during the earthquake response in Syria. Capture the stories and lessons learned from women leaders, grassroots organisations and other key stakeholders. This documentation not only preserves valuable insights but also serves as a foundation for informed decision-making in future crisis situations.

Invest in experience: Build on the **technical experience of community-based women-led groups** to inform gender sensitive and feminist approaches to humanitarian response. This includes supporting them to develop training materials and tools and to provide support to other groups. It is important to build and invest in their capacity rather than relying on "external consultants" who are not necessarily familiar with the Syrian context or on male-led organisations to provide "women's rights programming".



GENDER- AND CONFLICT-SENSITIVE CRISIS RESPONSE: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY, ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Comprehensive: Women's experiences during and in the aftermath of the earthquake underscore the necessity for comprehensive strategies that not only address the aftermath but also the deeply rooted systemic issues that perpetuate vulnerabilities for women in times of crisis. In conflict zones like Syria, women and vulnerable groups already face numerous challenges, and the earthquake significantly intensified these. Therefore, post-earthquake support must **tackle the political, social and economic challenges** heightened by the earthquakes, in addition to overall disaster relief.

Accessible: Ensure that aid is accessible to all members of the community, especially marginalised groups in remote areas. Ensure crisis response programming is gender-accessible, and designed to reach different segments of women, including but not limited to widows, women heads of households, adolescents, disabled and elderly women.

Transformative: Crisis response programming should be sensitive and seek to **transform existing stigma or inequalities** that prevent marginalised groups from accessing aid. This includes addressing discrimination against menstruating women. It should also address racism

and other forms of discrimination that prevent communities from accessing aid, including gender specific elements to this discrimination. Whether it is discrimination and backlash in neighbouring countries towards Syrian and Kurdish populations, or discrimination within Syria against IDPs, crisis programming should counter stigma, discrimination and hate speech and promote inclusivity, cultural understanding and tolerance within the host community.

Long-term: Continue **supporting the affected communities** in areas still grappling with the aftermath of the earthquake, with a particular focus on livelihood, education, housing and property rights. Ensure this support is gender-sensitive, taking into account the specific needs and priorities of women.

Prioritise mental health and psychosocial support, including to women and mothers, recognising the long-term psychological impact and trauma of earthquakes on the community.

Conflict sensitive and rights-based: The United Nations and other aid agencies, as well as member states, must ensure **unrestricted and unhindered cross-border delivery of aid and programming**.

PROTECTING AND PROMOTING WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS CONTEXTS

Protect civic space for Syrians and Syrian women-led organisations and initiatives: Within crisis response programming, support and create space for local communities to engage in and lead the response. Whether this includes initiatives in local communities across Syria, cross-line solidarity or initiatives in neighbouring countries, international organisations and member states should support and promote the operation of Syrian civil society, including women-led organisations, in Syria and neighbouring countries and provide legal support and protection.

Prioritise mechanisms to address sexual- and gender-based violence: Such mechanisms should be integrated into wider humanitarian responses, by ensuring shelters are set up in ways that are safe for displaced women, setting up anonymous complaint procedures and providing resources for self care and mental health support among displaced women, as a way of minimising risk for sexual- and gender-based violence.

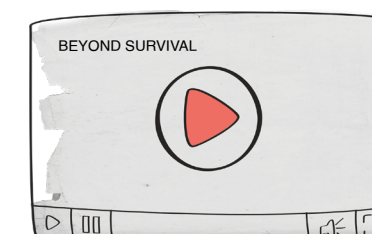
Emphasising the need for a feminist and gender-sensitive lens in policy and practice, these recommendations underscore the importance of inclusivity, flexibility and awareness. The Syrian context, marked by unique challenges and constraints, sets an example for a challenging context that demands a tailored approach prioritising the diverse needs of women and vulnerable groups, and taking into account conflict dynamics. It is our collective responsibility to advocate for and implement these recommendations, fostering a response ecosystem that is not only effective but also respects and uplifts the voices of those often marginalised.

As we move forward, it is imperative to reflect on the lessons learned and commit to continuous improvement. The experiences shared within this paper provide a foundation for building a more resilient, equitable and compassionate response framework, ensuring that the unique needs of women remain at the forefront of our collective efforts. Ultimately, these recommendations and lessons learned, and their implementation in future disaster response efforts, aim to shape a future where disaster response is not just a reaction but a proactive, gender-sensitive and community-driven process.

#BeyondSurvival



<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0P4D1SFPvmnP5CPP5Wqtp?si=SIFPeOTUQOioXKSRZUzMkA&nd=1&dlsi=4ea5ef8c41b74029>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4igspSRTguQ=1&dlsi=4ea5ef8c41b74029>

