

SYRIA RESEARCH REPORT



Gender Dynamics in Northwest Syria's Agri-Food Landscape

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Contents

Executive Summary	01
1. Introduction	04
2. Conceptual Framework	08
3. Methodology	10
4. Findings	11
4.1. Access to Productive Resources and Control of Physical Assets	11
4.2. Access to Agricultural Inputs and Financial Services	14
4.3. Social Capital and Decision- Making Power	17
5. Recommendations	21
References	26

Executive Summary

- ▶ The Syrian conflict has drastically reduced agricultural productivity and food security. Displacement has cut cultivated land from 3.1 million hectares in 2010 to under 1.5 million in 2019. The destruction of agricultural infrastructure and lack of land rights frameworks worsened the situation. Economic instability, inflation, and currency depreciation further limited farmers' access to services and markets, causing severe food shortages. Syria's GDP contracted by 7.4% annually from 2011-2019, with over half the population facing food insecurity in 2022.
- ▶ Northwest Syria, a crucial wheat and barley production area, has seen its agricultural sector disrupted by the ongoing crisis, wildfires, droughts, water scarcity, fuel shortages, and lack of inputs. Despite these challenges, wheat and barley remain the dominant crops, particularly in Azaz and Jarablus. Issues with land use, HLP rights, and drought have severely impacted productivity, with rainfall dropping by 50%. Concerns over seed quality and high prices have led farmers to diversify crops, including anise, black cumin, and greenhouse vegetables like tomatoes, eggplants, and beetroot.
- ▶ In northwest Syria, women significantly contribute to agriculture through crop cultivation, animal husbandry and food processing. However, they face substantial barriers in accessing and owning agricultural assets. Gender disparities in asset ownership are pronounced, with men primarily controlling land, livestock, and machinery. Discriminatory land tenure systems, customary inheritance practices, and cultural norms restrict women's land and property rights, often resulting in women relinquishing their rights to male relatives. Even when women hold ownership contracts, control often remains with male family members, limiting women's active and productive participation in the sector.
- ▶ Access to modern farming equipment typically occurs through rental arrangements mediated by male family members, with women often unaware of rental fees and equipment quality. This lack of knowledge and bargaining power impedes women's ability to plan agricultural operations effectively. Consequently, many women resort to traditional, home-based food processing activities using basic methods and materials.

- ▶ Societal norms and traditions hinder women's access to essential agricultural inputs and financial services and significantly limit their direct engagement with wholesale merchants, making them reliant on male family members for resource procurement. Processing challenges include limited access to industrial storage and equipment, with women harvesters working under exploitative conditions due to lack of regulations, earning minimal wages, and facing economic insecurity.
- ▶ The absence of formal banking systems and credit facilities forces women to rely on low-income, home-based food processing activities, perpetuating economic vulnerability. Moreover, women's constrained access to real-time market information has negatively reduced their pricing and competitiveness.
- ▶ NGOs and local councils often overlook women's needs in agricultural input distribution. Additionally, the donor-driven financial support which is usually provided by national and international NGOs is declining and often fails to address women's multifaceted needs, leading to a noticeable exclusion of women from most agriculture and agri-food programmes.
- ▶ Participants report that male-dominated networks monopolise negotiation spaces with local authorities, exacerbating women's marginalisation. Formal syndicates like the Farmers Association lack female representation and fail to engage with informal networks, further undermining women's advocacy capacity and influence on policy and regulation.
- ▶ Participants also express concerns that most NGO-implemented programmes focus on short-term outputs and primarily target the production level, neglecting the processing and distribution stages of the value chain. Capacity building sessions often overlook the specific needs and obstacles women face, such as accessing distribution networks and financial management.

- ▶ Donor-funded NGOs should spearhead institutional reforms to promote gender-sensitive agricultural policies, extending beyond production to include processing, distribution, and marketing. Policies must actively involve women stakeholders in their design to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Establishing women-centric committees at the district level, equipped with strategic planning and marketing training, will enhance women's capacity to influence such policies. This participatory approach will foster ownership, accountability, and the sustainability of gender-responsive policies across the agricultural value chain.
- ▶ Supporting women entrepreneurs through targeted interventions is crucial for fostering economic independence and enhancing overall well-being. Initiatives should focus on improving women's access to education, vocational training, and entrepreneurial skills to enable their active participation in income-generating activities, particularly in high-value agricultural sectors like horticulture and small-scale agribusiness.
- ▶ Tailored support at processing and distribution stages, coupled with market-oriented training and mentorship, can significantly boost women entrepreneurs' competitiveness in the agri-food market.
- ▶ Displaced women face additional challenges, including disrupted networks, insecure land access, and limited agricultural inputs, further hindering their agricultural livelihoods. Therefore, targeted interventions for displaced women, including secure land tenure and subsidised agricultural inputs, are crucial for addressing their unique vulnerabilities and fostering sustainable agricultural practices.
- ▶ Governance structures must integrate women into agricultural extension services, enhancing support and technical assistance. This requires appointing more women to local council agricultural offices. Establishing a minimum wage for women in agri-food enterprises with stringent enforcement is crucial for fair labour practices. Facilitating recognition of women-led associations like the Network of Female Daily Harvesters allows effective advocacy. Civil society organisations should lead advocacy efforts, promoting gender-responsive policies and enhancing women's representation in governance for sustainable change in northwest Syria.

1. Introduction

Syria's agriculture and agri-food sectors have long been integral components of the country's economy, contributing significantly to food security, a national priority of the consecutive governments since the 1980s. Prior to the conflict, Syrian governments implemented subsidies, price controls, and land distribution programmes aimed at supporting farmers, and ensuring food security and rural livelihoods. However, despite the fact that a significant portion of the pre-war population was engaged in different forms of farming-related activities, representing a "critical safety net" for 6.7 million people (FAO, 2017), the agriculture sector contributed less than 20% of Syria's pre-war Gross Domestic Product (IAASTD, 2009).

A myriad of institutional, environmental and socioeconomic factors negatively impacted the productivity and sustainability of the agriculture and agri-food sectors in the pre-conflict era. Those include the centralised governance of the agriculture sector, and the high levels of inefficiency, corruption, and distortionary effects of the government-led policies. For instance, subsidies on fuel and fertilisers, intended to benefit farmers, were often misallocated and diverted, leading to resource inefficiency and inequitable distribution (IFPRI, 2013). Instead of overcoming these challenges, the Syrian government began a gradual process of lifting subsidies for agricultural inputs during 2000s, including the reduction of energy subsidies, which led to a noticeable decline in the productivity of the agriculture sector across the country (Mohammed et al., 2019). Furthermore, the overexploitation and depletion of water resources, coupled with inefficient irrigation practices and inadequate water management, in addition to land degradation and desertification as a direct result of climate change, posed additional formidable challenges to agricultural sustainability (Ceccarelli and Grando, 2007; Galie et al., 2009).

Socioeconomic dynamics, including population growth, rural-urban migration, income inequality, and decreasing profitability of the agriculture sector, have also significantly limited agricultural economic trends in pre-war Syria. The rural-urban migration has contributed to the depletion of the rural labour force. According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, the rural population decreased from 56.8% of the total population in 2005 to 53.6% in 2010, reflecting the trend of urbanisation and rural-urban migration (SCBS, 2010). Income inequality has also widened, further exacerbating disparities in access to resources and opportunities for small-scale farmers.

The ongoing Syrian conflict has had a profound catastrophic impact on the country's agricultural productivity, livelihood resilience and food security. The conflict-related mass displacement, within the country and abroad, particularly of residents of rural areas, has plummeted the agricultural land under cultivation from 3.1 million hectares in 2010 to less than 1.5 million hectares in 2019, representing a stark decline in agricultural production (FAO, 2019). This situation was further intensified by the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, including irrigation systems and storage facilities, as well as the absence of institutional and regulatory frameworks to secure the Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights, which greatly restricted farmers' access to and ownership over agricultural lands.

The country's increasing economic instability, inflation, and currency depreciation sharply increased the difficulties of farmers in accessing agricultural services, finance, and domestic and regional markets. Price volatility and market and value-chain disruptions have led to food shortages, increased production costs and a sharp decline in purchasing power, resulting in alarming levels of food insecurity (Mehchy et al., 2023). According to the World Bank, Syria's GDP contracted by an average of 7.4% per year between 2011 and 2019, reflecting the severe economic repercussions of the conflict (World Bank, 2023), with an estimated 12 million people in Syria, comprising over half of the population, categorised as food insecure in 2022 (WFP, 2022).

In 2010, females formed about 20% of the total agricultural labour force in Syria, a relatively high figure compared to the female share of the total labour force, estimated at less than 13% in the same year (SCBS, 2010). However, legal and customary norms often favoured male inheritance rights, relegating women to subordinate land rights and limited control over agricultural decision-making. Moreover, discriminatory practices such as the 'male-head of household' requirement for land registration further marginalised women's land rights, undermining their economic autonomy and security (Galiè et al., 2013). These norms translated into unequal access to extension services, training programmes, and market opportunities for women farmers.

Northwest Syria (NWS) has historically served as a vital hub for wheat and barley crop production, contributing significantly to the country's pre-war food security. However, the agricultural sector in NWS has been severely disrupted by the ongoing crisis and a series of additional challenges, including wildfires, droughts, water resource scarcity, fuel shortages, and a lack of production inputs. Despite these obstacles, wheat and barley crops have remained the predominant cultivated crops in northwest Syria, comprising a substantial proportion of cultivated land in key regions such as Azaz and Jarablus, with 67% and 52%, respectively (iMMAP, 2023).

The agricultural landscape in NWS is characterised by various challenges and considerations related to land use and Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights, which significantly impact farmers' agricultural practices. Issues such as soil quality, land tenure insecurity, and limited access to suitable land pose significant obstacles to agricultural productivity and resilience in the region. Moreover, Syria's prolonged drought has had devastating effects on the country's agricultural production, which is clearly demonstrated in the substantial decline of rainfall percentages by approximately 50% in some regions in NWS, compared to pre-war levels in 2019 (ibid).

While wheat and barley seeds have remained relatively accessible to farmers in NWS, concerns have arisen regarding their quality and exorbitant prices in the local market. Farmers express apprehensions regarding the purity and yield potential of the seeds available, raising doubts about their suitability for cultivation. In response to these challenges, many farmers have diversified their crop portfolios, opting to cultivate alternative grain crops such as anise, black cumin seeds, and coriander (Enab Baladi, 2024a). Additionally, there has been a noticeable increase in the greenhouse farming of vegetables compared to pre-war levels, with farmers prioritising crops such as tomatoes, eggplants and beetroot (Enab Baladi, 2024b).

Basic food processing activities, including sorting, grading, fermentation, pasteurisation, dehydration, canning, preservation, and packaging, has witnessed a gradual increase in northwest Syria. This trend can be attributed to several factors, notably the need to address market gaps in essential processed foodstuffs arising from disruptions in commercial and trading exchanges with other regions of the country, and the need for income-generating opportunities for many households, particularly those who lost their main source of income due to displacement, the loss of the primary breadwinner, and the acute deterioration of the economy and living conditions.

Women in NWS have an essential role in food processing activities and the agri-food sector in general. This involvement spans various domains, such as home-based activities, typically favoured by the majority of women, and participating in constantly emerging small-scale processing enterprises and cooperatives. However, the multifaceted societal, institutional and economic challenges, compounded by gender-based constraints, exploitation and discriminatory customary regulations facing women at the different levels of the agri-food value chain are often overlooked in most of the agricultural and agri-food interventions, thus hindering the realisation of inclusive and sustainable agricultural development in NWS.

This report examines the gender dynamics of the agri-food sector in northwest Syria, with a main focus on the contextual challenges facing women in terms of accessibility to productive resources, such as physical assets, agricultural inputs, financial services and agricultural-related formal and informal networks across the different levels of the value chain. It derives its analytical framework from the FAO Gender-Sensitive Value Chain (GSVC), while contextualising its key components to the institutional and socioeconomic dynamics in northwest Syria, in addition to a series of key informant interviews and two in-country focus group discussions with a diverse set of stakeholders, including women farmers, owners of home-made agri-food workshops and representatives of quasi-state agricultural governance structures. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations aimed at western donor agencies and policymakers.

2. Conceptual Framework

The report primarily relies on the FAO Gender-Sensitive Value Chain (GSVC) Framework (2016) as a guiding analytical thread to capture gender disparities in agricultural value chains, which emphasise the need to address unequal power relations, agency, institutional frameworks and social norms that perpetuate such disparities.

FAO's GSVC framework, shown in Figure 1, adopts an analytical approach that centres on individuals and households, positing that gender inequalities frequently originate within the household unit, where dynamics of agency and power are intricately entwined. It also focuses on various gender-based constraints that significantly affect the core and extended value chains, institutional and economic elements. Therefore, it produces a nuanced understanding of the structural barriers that impede women's full participation within the agricultural and agri-food sectors.

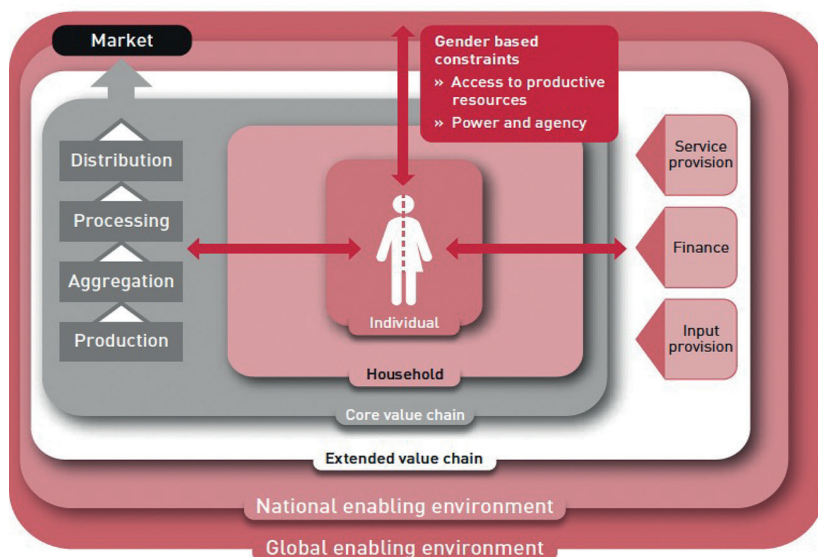


Figure 1: the FAO Gender-Sensitive Value Chain (GSVC) Framework.

Source: Developing gender-sensitive value chains – A guiding framework. FAO. 2016.

The framework identifies four core levels as the fundamental components of agricultural value chains (the core value chain): 1) the production level, which include farming and cultivation activities, rearing of livestock, and other primary agricultural activities; 2) the aggregation level, consisting of the gathering and consolidation of agricultural products, and, in certain instances, collaborative efforts among local farmers to collectively aggregate their produce for distribution to wholesale or retail markets; 3) the processing level, which encompasses all activities aimed at transforming raw agricultural materials into processed products suitable for consumption. These activities may include packaging, canning, freezing, drying, fermentation, and pasteurisation, among others; and 4) the distribution level, which involves the movement of agricultural products from producers to wholesale enterprises, grocery stores, supermarkets, or other retail outlets, with distribution networks spanning both local and national scales.

Within this framework, the gender-based constraints are categorised into two principal domains. Firstly, there is the access to productive resources, encapsulating a spectrum of tangible assets and services crucial for productive agricultural engagement, such as access to land tenure, agricultural equipment and financial services, which collectively shape the capacity of individuals, particularly women, to participate effectively in agricultural activities. Secondly, the power dynamics and agency within the agricultural-related sectors, which are usually strongly linked with social capital (access to various agricultural related formal and informal networks), technical competencies, self-confidence levels and decision-making autonomy.

3. Methodology

The methodology of the report relied on three key components to ensure comprehensive coverage and depth of analysis. A desk review was conducted, encompassing an examination of Syria-related reports and grey literature, including gender dynamics within the context of the Syrian conflict, pre-war agricultural sector economics, and key insights from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) operating in the agriculture and food production sectors, particularly in northwestern Syria.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the cities of Idlib (Idlib governorate) and Azaz (northern Aleppo) during the period from 10 to 15 March 2023. The FGDs comprised a total of 20 participants, with 60% representation from women, drawn from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants included individuals engaged in various agricultural activities such as land and livestock ownership, sheep breeding, dairy product manufacturing, home food provision, conservatory operation, as well as workers in food packaging workshops, representatives from agricultural offices within local councils, and in-country personnel from NGOs operating within the agricultural sector. Furthermore, the methodology encompassed four semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with national experts in agriculture and representatives from international donor agencies providing support to the agriculture sector in northwest Syria.

4. Findings

The following sections address the most pressing institutional, cultural, legal and socioeconomic obstacles facing women in the agri-food sector in northwest Syria, including their accessibility to physical assets, social capital, agricultural inputs, financial services and decision-making abilities within formal and informal agricultural networks and associations.

Generally, our findings demonstrate that the majority of women respondents encounter barriers in accessing crucial agricultural inputs, including seeds, fertilisers, and irrigation systems, which are essential for sustainable farming practices and enhanced productivity. Moreover, the lack of access to financial services, such as credit, savings, and insurance, exacerbates women's economic vulnerability and constrains their ability to invest in agricultural enterprises. Finally, women's decision-making abilities within formal and informal agricultural networks and associations are often marginalised, depriving them of agency and influence in shaping agricultural policies and practices.

Moreover, our findings clearly show that women's Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights are often undermined by discriminatory legal frameworks, patriarchal customs, and inadequate access to formal land tenure systems. All of these challenges substantially limit women's abilities in accessing physical assets essential for agricultural production, such as land, livestock, and agricultural machinery, thus weakening their social capital and further isolating them from valuable resources and opportunities.

4.1. Access to Productive Resources and Control of Physical Assets

This section aims at unpacking the most pressing challenges and obstacles facing women in accessing physical assets throughout the agri-food core value chain. Those assets include farm lands, livestock, storage facilities, cultivating and harvesting materials, and processing and packaging machineries.

Women in northwest Syria play multifaceted roles in agriculture, engaging in activities such as crop cultivation, animal husbandry, food processing, and marketing. Despite their significant contributions, women face numerous barriers to accessing and owning agricultural assets and resources, constraining their participation and empowerment in the sector.

Our findings demonstrate that one of the most significant challenges facing women in northwest Syria is the prevailing gender disparities in asset ownership. Men typically hold primary control over critical agricultural assets, including land, livestock, and, to a lesser degree, other productive resources, such as machinery and equipment.

Discriminatory land tenure systems, customary inheritance practices and entrenched cultural norms perpetuate unequal access to land and property rights for women. Many respondents emphasised that although the laws regulating inheritance and property rights, including those derived from Islamic Sharia law, stipulate the right of women to inherit land regardless of its intended use, established customs and traditions, however, require women to give up their right to ownership of agricultural land and fruit trees, such as olive trees, either to their husbands or a first-degree male relative. In some cases, even if the ownership contract for agricultural land remains in the hands of the woman, actual control of this land rests with a male family member. A female owner of a small food processing workshop shared that *"women in Syria inherit cash, residential properties, or livestock but not agricultural land"*.

Moreover, women farmers in northwest Syria confront formidable obstacles in accessing and owning essential agricultural machinery and equipment. The high costs associated with machinery acquisition, coupled with limited availability and gender biases in distribution channels, pose significant barriers to women's ability to mechanise farming operations and enhance productivity.

For instance, women's access to modern farming equipment, such as tractors, irrigation systems, and heavy-duty processing machinery, usually occurs through rental arrangements, via a male family member, with a limited number of merchants or vendors. This access is often constrained by the high rental prices charged by these vendors, the limited availability of equipment and, in some cases, additional costs in the form of hidden commissions by the male family member who is facilitating the renting process. Most women participants expressed a lack of knowledge regarding rental fees and equipment quality and availability, as well as the most appropriate channels to obtain such crucial information. A female participant who owns an agricultural land for wheat and barley expressed that *"in most cases my main role is harvesting my land via rented tractors. I don't know the actual prices or fees of these vehicles, or if these are the best suitable fees or options. My brother-in-law deals with vendors and all financial agreements are done through him."*

Consequently, women's bargaining ability is compromised, and they face challenges in effectively planning and forecasting operational costs and income revenues associated with agricultural activities. As a result, many women opt for home-based food processing activities that rely on traditional methods, such as manual dehydration and pasteurisation, and utilise basic packaging materials sourced from local markets.

Food processing activities that require specialised machinery, such as freezing or canning, often necessitate access to larger-scale workshops, usually owned and operated by men. In such settings, women may encounter limited control over these materials and equipment, leading to different forms of financial exploitation amidst an absence of regulations, protection and institutional oversight.

Our findings also show that a significant number of women working in the agri-food sector often find themselves unable to control the income and financial revenues derived from their own agricultural products due to systemic barriers that limit their access to distribution channels and decision-making power within familial and societal structures. Several women participants indicated that many women are often side-lined in the negotiation of prices and sales agreements, leading to their dependency on male relatives for financial transactions. A female harvester who also ran home-based food processing activities emphasised that *"the men in family handle all financial transactions. They often tell me that women are not equipped to deal with the market directly because merchants are greedy and will exploit us."*

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) encounter additional obstacles that exacerbate their vulnerability and limit their access to agricultural assets and productive resources. Such vulnerabilities affect displaced women more clearly than men. Displacement disrupts women's established networks, land tenure arrangements and livelihood strategies, forcing them to navigate unfamiliar environments and unstable living conditions. IDP women often lack secure access to land for cultivation, as well as essential agricultural inputs and machinery. Displacement also disrupted women's access to markets, extension services and distribution channels, further hindering their ability to obtain the necessary equipment needed to sustain their agricultural livelihoods.

4.2. Access to Agricultural Inputs and Financial Services

This section addresses the most important challenges impeding women's access to agricultural inputs and financial services in northwest Syria across the three essential tiers of the value chain: production, processing, and distribution.

At the production level, despite the availability of essential raw materials in the local markets, societal norms rooted in patriarchal traditions impede women's direct engagement with wholesale merchants. Consequently, women are often reliant on male family members to negotiate prices and procure necessary resources.

For instance, many sources of agricultural inputs, including seeds, seedlings, and fertilisers, are usually provided by NGOs and agricultural governance structures, such as local councils' agricultural offices in the case of Azaz or the Ministry of Agriculture of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib. However, such entities often overlook the specific needs and preferences of women, where such products are typically announced and negotiated in environments that exclude women, perpetuating their marginalisation and limiting their access to critical information and resources essential for agricultural productivity. A female participant who worked in a food processing workshop alongside 15 other women shared that:

"We usually don't have access to these inputs and services provided by the [non-governmental] organisations and [local] councils. In order to know if these entities are selling or distributing seeds or fertilisers you need to know someone who knows someone working in these entities."

Women engaged in producing home-made preserves face additional constraints related to market information and pricing. The lack of real-time access to market prices for key commodities such as vegetables, olive oil, and dairy products impairs women's ability to accurately price their goods, and, as a result, significantly decreases their competitiveness in the marketplace. Notably, displaced women originating from areas outside northwest Syria, such as Homs or Ghouta, may face slightly fewer societal constraints when accessing the market and raw materials. This is mainly due to variations in local norms, traditions and perceptions regarding women's engagement in economic activities in their original place of residence before their displacement.

The aforementioned challenges persist at the processing level, where the majority of participants, males and females, expressed encountering obstacles in accessing industrial storage facilities and medium or large-scaled processing equipment, such as tractors and combine and forage harvesters. Such vehicles and equipment are typically owned by a handful of individuals and are available for rent at high costs.

As a result, many landowners resort to hiring female daily workers, commonly referred to as women harvesters, to assist with harvesting tasks. These women, predominantly coming from impoverished villages and often lacking any formal education, often work up to 12 hours a day under extremely difficult situations, particularly during summer, with little to no breaks and typically earning around \$1 (USD) per day. One daily women harvester shared that:

"A truck comes to take us to the land that needs harvesting. Most of the time we are twenty to thirty women, most of us live in makeshift refugee camps. We harvest the land all day. We eat rice and chickpeas that we bring with us. They pay us in Turkish lira, equivalent to a dollar or less. I don't know the exchange rate. Our husbands wait for us at home, they take this money and give us our daily allowance."

The absence of regulations governing the working conditions of female daily harvesters, and the lack of institutional oversight and safeguards in place, make these women susceptible to various forms of exploitation, further exacerbating their economic insecurity and vulnerability. In response to these challenges, a recent grassroots initiative has emerged in the form of the Network of Female Daily Harvesters. This initiative aims to improve the living standards of female harvesters by advocating for better working conditions and wages through negotiations with landowners. However, the efficacy of this initiative remains limited without institutional support and oversight from relevant agricultural authorities and governance structures.

Obtaining basic packaging materials for home-based agri-food activities presents a relatively straightforward process for most women in northwest Syria. Many women respondents expressed a relative ease in either procuring light packaging materials, such as plastic containers, directly from local markets or utilising recycled items, such as glass jars.

The availability of packaging materials and raw ingredients, coupled with minimum requirements for transportation and the capacity to produce diverse food products using simple processing techniques within the confines of their homes that do not require heavy machinery, such as dehydration and pasteurisation, contribute to the viability of home-based food production as a relatively safe sector for women in northwest Syria. However, the main limitations and obstacles, as demonstrated below, remain persistent at the distribution level and direct access to the local markets.

It is worth noting that the influx of women IDPs from the middle and southern parts of Syria into the northwest has facilitated the diversification of agri-food production through the transfer of knowledge and processing techniques from their original areas to the northwest region. Drawing upon their experiences and expertise from their places of origin, women have adapted traditional processing techniques to suit the local context in northwest Syria. For example, the cultivation and processing of dried fruits, such as figs, apricots, and raisins, have emerged as viable income-generating activities for women IDPs. Additionally, home-based milling of grains and cereals has gained prominence as a cost-effective and sustainable approach to producing flour, home-made pastries and other staple food items.

At the distribution level, restricted access to markets, inputs, and information, which are essential for agricultural production and marketing, are contributing to the marginalisation of women's role in the sector. Many factors contribute to these restrictions, including the volatile pricing mechanisms due to the lack of institutional capacity of the de facto governance structures to enforce clearly defined pricing policies, as well as the inability of most domestic producers to compete with the agri-food products imported from Turkey.

Many participants complained about the short-sighted importation policies and practices adopted by both the de facto authorities and traders operating in northwest Syria. These policies, characterised by their short-sighted nature, usually lack a comprehensive assessment reflecting the actual demand of the local market and fail to prioritise locally manufactured food products. Consequently, the local market becomes flooded with imported foodstuffs, predominantly originating from large factories based in Turkey. These factories often benefit from relatively low production costs compared to local producers, exacerbating the competition faced by domestic food manufacturers and undermining the economic viability of the entire agri-food sector in the region.

The majority of respondents emphasised a significant decline in financial support within the agriculture sector, particularly in the form of grants traditionally provided by NGOs. The increasingly limited availability of such grants often fail to adequately address the multifaceted needs of women engaged in agricultural activities. For instance, grants tend to be narrowly focused, providing only partial financial assistance for specific inputs such as seeds, fodder, fertilisers, or livestock. Moreover, the exclusion of women from the majority of NGOs operating in various agricultural-related activities has resulted in grant programmes that overlook the diverse needs and priorities of female farmers and entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, the absence of a banking system and financial services, such as credit or microloans, pose significant barriers to women's economic productivity and ability to compete in the agriculture and agri-food sectors. Without access to formal financial institutions and credit facilities, women are often compelled to rely on low-income home-based food processing activities as a primary source of income. This reliance on informal and often precarious forms of employment perpetuates cycles of poverty and economic vulnerability among women across all areas in the northwest.

4.3. Social Capital and Decision-Making Power

This section examines the power dynamics and agency of women within the agri-food sector in northwest Syria. However, given the inherent complexity and the challenges of objectively measuring these concepts, our analytical approach centred on interrelated proxy indicators identified in the FAO's Gender-Sensitive Value Chain (GSVC) Framework as strongly linked to the concepts of power and agency. Firstly, there is women's social capital, broadly defined as their active participation in formal and informal agricultural related networks and associations, including local governance structures, agricultural syndicates and NGOs operating in these sectors. Secondly, emphasis is placed on women's decision-making autonomy and their technical proficiencies within these networks, structures, and associations.

During the course of focus group discussions conducted in Azaz and Idlib, women participants expressed an absence of substantive representation of women in the local councils' relevant offices and committees operating in the agriculture or agri-food sectors. They underscored the exclusionary practices, consolidating the dominance of men over these structures, particularly those individuals with strong ties to landownership, influential merchant networks, and trading enterprises. These male counterparts, as highlighted by the participants, effectively monopolise negotiation spaces with local governance entities and de facto authorities across both regions.

All women participants, despite their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and roles across the agri-food core value chain, uniformly conveyed a shared experience of marginalisation, revealing that they have not been afforded opportunities for consultation by local councils, either through direct engagement or indirect involvement in decision-making processes. A female participant in Idlib expressed that, *"I have been working in this [agri-food] sector for more than a decade. I was never invited to any meeting with any agricultural authorities or [non-governmental] organisations."* Another participant in Azaz emphasised that nepotism and favouritism play a significant role in who get to attend meetings or consultations with local authorities.

These institutionally exclusionary practices are also witnessed in formal syndicates, such as the Farmers Association. Such syndicates lack any female representation within their ranks and fail to implement outreach strategies aimed at engaging with emerging informal networks in the region. One such emerging network is the Network of Female Daily Harvesters, established with the primary goal of advocating for improved wages and working conditions for female farmers and harvesters. However, despite their efforts to formalise their association and engage in constructive dialogue with relevant authorities and syndicates, their requests for registration have been consistently rejected by governance structures in Idlib, thus severely undermining the bargaining power and advocacy capacity of the Network's female members.

The lack of representation and active engagement with women operating in the agri-food sector by both the governance systems and syndicates in Azaz and Idlib have been depriving women of opportunities to influence and shape policies and regulations that directly impact their livelihood, pushing them to subordinate roles and limiting their access to essential agriculture inputs, capacity building programmes, market information and financial opportunities.

Most women participants expressed a noticeable gradual increase in the number of NGO-led agriculture programmes that are targeting women in both regions for the past three years. This trend can be attributed, in part, to the implementation of international donor inclusion policies and the growing presence of women workers within these NGOs. The majority of these programmes are geared towards providing livelihood support for women, offering technical training sessions, and supplying agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and basic equipment.

Despite this noticeable increase in NGO-led programme availability, many women participants remain sceptical about its transformative potential in altering the gender dynamics of the agri-food sector. Their reservations stem from two primary concerns. Firstly, the prevailing focus of most NGO-led initiatives on short-term outputs is perceived as inadequate in fostering sustainable and enduring change. A female beneficiary of one such programme noted that *"the projects typically span a mere three months, and the provision of equipment and inputs often lacks a comprehensive assessment of actual needs and existing gaps in the sector."*

Secondly, these programmes tend to concentrate disproportionately on the production level of the value chain, neglecting the processing and distribution stages. This is also the case for most capacity building sessions, which are perceived by many participants to be redundant in terms of their thematic focus and training materials. The majority of these trainings often focus on the planting and harvesting practices, with little attention on the gaps and obstacles facing women in the remaining components of the value chain.

A number of participants expressed their need for trainings on the most suitable environmental and cost-saving practices for food processing, improving access to distribution networks, and economic feasibility studies and market research. Consequently, women's access to support and resources beyond the production phase remains limited, hindering their ability to engage fully in the entire agri-food value chain and realise their potential as active contributors to the sector's development. A female participant who ran a home-based food processing workshop in Idlib emphasised that:

"In order to be independent we need to prove our technical capacities in planning and financial management. They always tell us that women are not represented because we lack the technical knowledge, as if all men are born capable of doing business. We need women-only training programmes that enable us to get the financial support needed to carry on with our activities."

5. Recommendations

Gender-Responsive Policies Throughout the Core Value Chain:

International donor agencies should adopt a gender-sensitive approach within all of their programming and partnerships with national and international NGOs operating in the agriculture and agri-food sectors.

Donor-funded NGOs could serve as crucial entry points for broader institutional reforms aimed at promoting a gender-sensitive approach in agricultural policies, investment strategies, and livelihood support programmes, given the relatively wider margin and ability to influence policies and regulations within these NGOs compared to quasi-state governance structures. These policies should transcend short-term logistical support provided solely at the production level to encompass a comprehensive commitment addressing all components of the core value chain. This entails the formulation of clearly defined policies that underscore a long-term dedication to providing support for processing, distribution, and marketing activities for women entrepreneurs.

To ensure the effectiveness and relevance of these policies, active engagement of women stakeholders at the design phase is essential. Women's participation in the decision-making process guarantees that policies are tailored to meet their actual needs and requirements, thereby enhancing their impact and sustainability.

This could be achieved through the establishment of women-centric committees at the district level, comprising women actively involved in the agri-food sector. These technical committees should receive specialised trainings in strategic planning, marketing strategies, and other relevant technical capacities. By equipping women stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge, these committees can significantly enhance their capacity to contribute to the design, implementation, and evaluation of donor-funded programmes within their respective areas. This participatory approach not only ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives but also fosters ownership and accountability, thereby maximising the effectiveness and sustainability of gender-responsive policies throughout the agricultural value chain.

Financial and Technical Support for Women Entrepreneurs:

Empowering women entrepreneurs in northwest Syria through targeted interventions can significantly contribute to their economic independence and overall well-being. Initiatives aimed at enhancing women's access to education, vocational training, and entrepreneurial skills are essential for building their capacity to engage in income-generating activities and value-added agro-processing ventures. Furthermore, supporting women's participation in higher-value agricultural activities, such as horticulture, dairy farming, and small-scale agribusiness, can unlock their potential as key drivers of agricultural innovation and economic growth in the region.

At the production level, it is imperative to provide women with more opportunities for accessing microloans and small grants tailored to their specific needs. These financial resources can enable women to acquire the necessary means of production, including land, livestock, and agricultural inputs such as seeds, saplings, and fertilisers. However, it is essential that these grants are designed in consultation with women stakeholders to ensure that they address the actual challenges and requirements faced by women in the agriculture sector, and increase their direct engagement with vendors and suppliers while limiting the additional costs stemming from hidden commissions or fees imposed by male relatives who act as intermediaries.

Beyond the production level, financial support is also crucial at the processing stage. Many women entrepreneurs require assistance in obtaining packaging materials, renting suitable spaces for food processing activities that cannot be accommodated in their own homes, and acquiring relevant machinery for these activities. By facilitating access to financial resources, women can scale up their processing ventures and enhance the quality and value of their products.

At the distribution level, women entrepreneurs need access to up-to-date information on market needs, prices, distribution channels, and best practices in marketing. By equipping women with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can effectively navigate the market landscape and implement successful marketing strategies to promote their products. Providing training and mentorship opportunities tailored to the needs of women entrepreneurs can further enhance their capacity to succeed in the competitive agri-food market. Moreover, specialised NGOs can facilitate knowledge-sharing platforms between female and male entrepreneurs within the agri-food sector by bringing together traders and merchants operating in northwest Syria and Turkey – as the main hub for agri-food products exportation.

It is also imperative to implement targeted interventions to address women IDPs' specific needs and vulnerabilities by establishing support programmes tailored to the unique circumstances of displaced women, focusing on enhancing their access to land, inputs, and financial services. This could involve facilitating land allocation or leasing arrangements specifically for IDP women, and ensuring secure land tenure and access to agricultural plots for cultivation and grazing. Additionally, initiatives to provide subsidised or free agricultural inputs, such as seeds, fertilisers, and livestock, can help alleviate the financial burden on IDP women and enable them to sustain agricultural production.

Wider Governance and Institutional Reforms:

In order to address the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the agriculture and agri-food sectors in northwest Syria, it is crucial to adopt comprehensive reforms in laws and regulations implemented by the de facto governance structures. Firstly, there should be measures put in place to guarantee land tenure for women, ensuring their access to productive resources and enhancing their economic autonomy. Additionally, governance structures should prioritise the inclusion of women in extension services provided by agricultural offices, offering tailored support and technical assistance to women farmers and entrepreneurs. This could be achieved by concerted efforts to appoint more women in local councils' agriculture offices and other relevant executive positions, thus enhancing women's representation in governance structures and decision-making processes.

Secondly, it is imperative to establish a minimum wage for women working in privately owned agri-food enterprises, accompanied by strict enforcement mechanisms to prevent exploitation and ensure fair compensation for their labour.

Thirdly, official recognition and registration of women-led associations, such as the Network of Female Daily Harvesters, should be facilitated, allowing these organisations to advocate for the rights and interests of women in the agriculture sector effectively. These efforts should be accompanied by promoting the inclusion of women in agriculture syndicates, providing them with a platform to voice their concerns, access resources, and participate in shaping agricultural policies and programmes.

These measures could be negotiated with the de facto governance structures through introducing clear conditionalities within the main donors' financial support in the agriculture, livelihood and resilience programmes, including any activities related to early recovery initiatives.

The advocacy for the aforementioned measures should also be spearheaded by the wider civil society organisations (CSOs) and civic actors operating in northwestern Syria. By engaging in structured dialogue and collaboration between civic actors and women entrepreneurs, CSOs can leverage their expertise, networks, and grassroots connections to amplify the voices of women in the agri-food sector and push for meaningful change within the de facto governance structures. Furthermore, CSOs can play a crucial role in raising awareness among communities about the importance of gender-responsive policies and advocating for their implementation at the local, regional, and national levels.

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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