



Research Summary Report: Syrian Women's CSOs and Service Delivery

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SUMMARY

Integrity's research highlights that women's networks and organisations in Syria are active across a range of service delivery sectors. In many cases these groups are either responding to gaps in services provided by other NGOs, civil society organisations (CSO), or other service delivery actors, or they are providing understanding and access to the specific needs of women and children beneficiaries that other groups cannot.

Women's groups interviewed by Integrity are most active (62 per cent) in the education, skills training, and livelihoods sectors. These areas both help meet immediate economic and food security needs of women while also contributing to longer-term economic, social and political empowerment goals. Yet, 70 per cent of these groups are also delivering multiple services simultaneously. The distribution of food and non-food items (NFI) is prioritised by approximately 30 per cent of interviewed groups, most commonly in areas of active conflict at the time of research, such as Homs. While most respondents identified health care as a particularly pressing need, the delivery of these services by women's CSOs is currently constrained primarily by limited technical expertise and the high cost of healthcare interventions.

Many women's CSOs reported limited institutional capacities and an irregularity of funding as major negative impacts on the sustainability and strategic focus of the services they deliver. Many groups also noted that they are constrained by their operational context, highlighting in particular a trend over the past 12 months of decreasing mobility for women in areas controlled or significantly influenced by Islamist groups.

Based on respondents interviews, this report recommends engagement in this area be focused across three levels:

1. Filling gaps in gender-sensitive service delivery (i.e. health and education services) and scaling up activities in sectors where women's organisations have comparative advantage (i.e. skills training and livelihoods support);
2. Building the institutional capacities of women's organisations to deliver services in a more professional and sustainable manner; and
3. Technical and leadership support for the role of women within service delivery and public bodies such as Local Administrative Councils (LACs)

OBJECTIVES OF THIS REPORT

This research summary report provides a brief overview of the state of service delivery by Syrian women's CSOs. It draws on material from a longer report prepared by Integrity in April 2014 and is based upon research conducted in February and March 2014. Interviewees for this research were based primarily in areas in Hassakeh, Idlib, Damascus, and Rif Damascus,

as well as a limited number from Homs and Aleppo. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 research participants, including members of women's networks and organisations, individual activists and informal service delivery groups. Integrity notes that the data included in this summary report was current at the time of original publication but given the fluidity of the conflict in Syria, may now have changed. Several organisations interviewed for this report expressed an interest in developing partnerships with international actors. For further information on the material included in this report, or to connect with these organisations, please contact Integrity at syria@integrityresearch.com.

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN SERVICE DELIVERY BEFORE THE CONFLICT

Traditionally low levels of formal participation in the public sphere, and structural constraints such as the Association Law of 1958, have hindered the participation of women in service delivery sectors and the institutional development of women's organisations in Syria. However, multiple respondents interviewed for this report noted that women has an active presence in some service delivery roles before the conflict. This presence varied across sector and geographic location but was most commonly reported in professional sectors such as healthcare and education. Respondents also noted a pre-conflict divergence between the presence of women in service delivery in rural and urban communities, with the latter featuring higher female participation, attributed largely to higher levels of education.¹

WOMEN'S CSOs IN SERVICE DELIVERY: SECTORS OF INVOLVEMENT

Integrity's research shows women have been involved in service delivery since the earliest days of the conflict. They suggest that that since the conflict began, this has contributed to an increase in the involvement of women in a range of service delivery sectors beyond the health and education sectors. This change was attributed to increasing demand for basic services as a result of the conflict; the degradation or absence of government-run systems of service delivery; and an enhanced sense of empowerment on the part of some women newly-active in service delivery. Evidence suggests that the uprising has contributed to a shift in perceptions around gender roles, which in the words of one respondent from Homs, has "set a precedent for the years to come in regards to women's roles in service and aid delivery."

¹ For more information on the development of Syrian women's NGOs, see Integrity report, [Syrian Women's NGOs and Geneva II](#), February 2014.

Food and non-food item distribution

Only eight of the 33 service-delivering organisations interviewed by Integrity reported prioritising the delivery of food and non-food items (NFI). This is despite food insecurity in many communities and the absence of many essential cooking, washing and heating items. This relatively low level of involvement of women's CSOs also reflects the presence in the sector of better-resourced organisations with experience in humanitarian aid distribution, including international non-government organisations (INGOs), United Nations (UN) humanitarian and development agencies, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and faith-based charitable organisations. Yet some women's organisations are involved in food and NFI distribution services. This involvement tends to be focused on particular sections of the population with whom women's organisations have comparatively better access; or where they have a specific comparative advantage such as in the distribution of material specific for women and children such as hygiene and baby kits.

Health

Despite being identified by respondents as an area of significant need, and of historically stronger women's involvement, health services were identified by only two of the organisations interviewed by Integrity as their main focus of work currently. Respondents partially attributed this to decreases in women's mobility in the last 12 months, and an insecure environment as a result of the conflict that means that women cannot participate in this sector as they had previously.

In contrast to the limited provision of healthcare services, many interviewees noted that women's CSOs prioritise the delivery of psychosocial support services to women. Twelve service-providing CSOs interviewed by Integrity reported providing some kind of dedicated psychosocial services for women and children. This was attributed primarily to the traumatising effects of the conflict; the scale of GBV²; and the absence of alternative service providers.

Some medium to large size organisations with greater internal capacity have established psychosocial support services that are most commonly accessed by women beneficiaries. Smaller grassroots organisations have fewer resources to provide similar services, yet many still seek to provide some level of psychosocial support such as referrals.

Education, skills training, and livelihoods

Over two-thirds of women's CSOs interviewed for this research reported delivering education, skills training, or livelihoods services. This prioritisation was attributed to two factors: Firstly,

² A Euro-Med Human Rights Network report notes that sexual violence is one of the three principal human rights violations in the Syrian conflict. Euro-Med Human Rights Network, [Violence Against Women: Bleeding Wound in the Syrian Conflict](#), November 2013.

there is a strong perception among women's CSOs that this area is a major gap in the service delivery landscape in Syria that few other CSOs are responding to. Secondly, there appears to be a common concern on the part of organisations interviewed to prioritise women's economic, social and political empowerment and a recognition of the importance of education, skills and livelihoods as tools for achieving this empowerment. Education services provided by women's organisations vary considerably but are most commonly informal, not linked to a standardised curriculum, and are frequently delivered through existing multi-purpose women's centres. Skills training and livelihood services delivered by women's organisations cover a breadth of topics and delivery modalities. Most common are sewing or knitting livelihoods programmes that are linked to sales at local markets and that provide vocational training and income for beneficiaries. Other vocational training services frequently include hairdressing, small-scale food production, and IT literacy.

ANALYSIS: TRENDS, CAPACITIES, STAKEHOLDERS, OPPORTUNITIES

Trends

Evidence suggests that the type of services delivered by women's groups depends on geographical location, organisational philosophy and objectives, and operational capacity. This first point is evidenced by the difference between services provided in Homs and Atmeh. In areas close to the Turkish border such as Atmeh, there is a greater presence of women's organisations with access to INGOs. This proximity facilitates more reliable funding, resource supplies, and cross-border training, and thereby allows such groups to deliver a range of more complex services. In contrast, interviewees suggest that the conflict environment in Homs has meant that service delivery demands were focused largely on emergency relief. They note that limited available resources are prioritised accordingly and that the opportunity to engage in more complex services is significantly constrained.

As noted above, the involvement of women's organisations also tends to be in sectors where they have greater access or a comparative advantage in reaching women and children beneficiaries. Respondents reported that women's CSOs were most commonly (albeit in limited scale) involved in health services through the provision of basic medication, subsidised doctor visits, or maternal health support services such as financial assistance for hospital deliveries.

The operational context of women's CSOs is also a critical determinant in explaining the variance in the types of services delivered. Factors including the current conflict environment; socio-cultural dynamics relating to the acceptance of women in service delivery roles (e.g. education levels, rural-urban divisions); and the presence of specific actors, such as Islamist

militants³, who may actively oppose the involvement of women in the public sphere all impact upon the type of services delivered by women's groups and the extent to which they are delivered.

Capacity

Respondents interviewed by Integrity suggest that there is a functioning level of capacity among women's organisations to deliver basic services in their priority areas of education, skills training, and livelihoods.⁴ In the areas of food and NFI distribution, women's groups generally lack the resourcing, administrative and logistical capacity of larger NGOs or INGOs to deliver emergency relief at high volume. However respondents noted that women's groups have comparatively better access to women and children and were better placed to identify and respond to the specific service needs of these populations than other NGOs.

Many smaller organisations⁵ interviewed by Integrity were characterised by an absence of formal organisational systems or structures and limited resource mobilisation options. Their resourcing structures constrain their ability to plan strategically, and the services delivered by such organisations can be ad-hoc as a result. Smaller groups do report excellent relationships at the community level, which strengthens their access to and understanding of the service needs of beneficiaries and potentially improves their impact. Because of this close access to local communities, such groups often act as local partners for larger women's groups or networks.

Medium-sized groups and networks interviewed by Integrity have been able to expand from aid delivery into more complex service delivery over the course of the conflict to match the increasing demand for services. The reliability of their funding sources remains a challenge to the planning of activities, although some report having links with overseas-based Syrian CSOs or fundraising groups, which have a positive effect on the predictability and strategic focus of their activities.

With greater access to funds and more established organisational structures, larger umbrella networks or groups are able to deliver services in a more sustained and consistent manner. While such groups have wider networks of support with greater international coverage, they are still delivering services at a very local level, sometimes in partnership with smaller organisations. The below table provides a brief generalised overview of the principal findings on the capacity of Syrian women's CSOs, grouped according to approximate size.

³ This report uses this term to refer to a professed allegiance to Sharia (Islamic jurisprudence), recognising that the interpretation of Sharia that organisations or armed groups may wish to implement varies from liberal to extreme depending on the entity.

⁴ It is noted that organisation data reflects self-reporting by respondents. Given the focus of the report on service delivery capacity, some informants may have viewed research team members as potential sources of material support, and thus may have misrepresented their circumstances and cause. To mitigate the potential for respondent bias, interviewers used questions focused on capacity indicators (e.g. existence and type of financial systems in place, experience with INGOs or donors), and triangulated data with other sources to verify claims of capacity.

		Size of CSO		
		Small	Medium	Large
Area of Capacity	HR & Financial Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between 30-50 volunteer staff, with few or no paid staff. Limited experience with formal financial management practices. Indicators of structural capacities such as independent bank accounts are absent. Funding comes primarily from CSO members or local community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between 50-100 staff with a small number of paid employees. Budgets of approximately USD 2000-3000 per month. Some dedicated administrative capacity such as accountant personnel or financial tracking mechanisms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between 90-500 staff including a mix of paid employees and volunteers and dedicated administrative and programme positions. More established internal structures (e.g. Board of Directors, operational committees). Greater technical expertise in-house. Monthly budgets reach up to USD 28,000 per month.
	Programme type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beneficiary reach of up to 60 families. Programme focus primarily on small-scale food and NFI distribution and informal education services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated service delivery across multiple sectors, commonly in food and NFI distribution; psychosocial support; and education, skills and livelihoods. Beneficiary reach of between 300-600 families through food or NFI distribution services and several thousand women in psychosocial or livelihood services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commonly active in multiple sectors simultaneously. Greater focus on services that require more complex systems and processes for delivery such as education, health or livelihoods. Frequently delivering services through more established or stable environments, such as the Atmeh internally displaced person (IDP) camp. Beneficiary reach of up to several thousand families per month.
	Engagement with international actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little experience with international actors (INGOs/donors). Limited formal experience in the aid and development sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A small number of medium sized organisations have dedicated links with overseas-based Syrian CSOs or fundraising groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breadth of overseas funding sources such as expatriate networks or fundraising groups, as well as links to INGOs and funding groups in donor countries.

Interviewees note that women’s organisations are able to bring stronger gender-awareness to the delivery of certain types of services that other NGOs or civil society organisations do not. This has direct practical implications in terms of the availability of gender-sensitive emergency aid services (food, NFI, healthcare) to women in Syria. Respondents noted that this was particularly the case in rural areas where they said that women CSOs were better able to talk to women beneficiaries and accurately identify needs.

Opportunities

Registration, Grants, and Project Management Capacity: Evidence collected for this report suggests that women's organisations delivering services inside Syria face key operational and technical capacity issues. These constraints relate to the challenges of setting up overseas bank accounts to access funding; operational registration with government agencies; or the prohibitive costs, time delays or security concerns related to donor funding and financial reporting requirements. The underdeveloped institutional structures of many women's organisations in areas such as human resources or financial management also impede their ability to receive donor funding. Respondents emphasised greater flexibility and capacity building support to help a wide range of women's organisations meet donor requirements as a key opportunity for future support. Operational, administrative, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation topics were also specifically highlighted by respondents, as was capacity building around the Results Based Management (RBM) and project cycle management. Respondents also highlighted the need for help from donors in the registration process.

Technical knowledge in priority sectors: Interviewees note that some women's organisations lack technical expertise in areas of complex service delivery, particularly in the healthcare, psychosocial, or GBV support services sectors, where there is a need for specialised knowledge and experience. Many women's groups interviewed also report a lack of administrative and management capacity, particularly for mid-sized groups or those who have expanded in size since the conflict began.

Realistic and Effective Training Programmes: Recognising this need for greater expertise in specific technical and management areas, many respondents interviewed by Integrity identified training programmes as a capacity building priority. Interviewees stressed that such training should be suitable for, and tailored to, the Syrian context; should make use of Syrian trainers wherever possible; and should be in-country so as to retain expertise inside Syria. One respondent also suggested connecting Syrian women's organisations with other organisations in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, where comparative experience was perceived to be of greater relevance to Syrian women.

Women's CSOs and local stakeholders

Most interviewees with experience dealing with Local Administrative Councils (LACs) on service delivery matters noted positive but irregular assistance provided by LACs that was primarily related to the sharing of beneficiary information and local needs analysis. Many respondents described the Councils as ineffective or non-essential to the kinds of service delivery work that women's CSOs were doing. In contrast however, women's groups who had

experience engaging with LACs around elections or issues of political representation reported the relationship as highly problematic. This was attributed to a combination of reluctance on the part of men on the Councils to work with women as well as barriers to participation including mobility constraints which inhibit attendance at Council meetings; social or cultural resistance to women's public role; or a lack of previous experience in administration, which was interpreted by some community and LAC members as indicative of women's inability to do such work.

Importantly, most interviewees emphasised that it was possible to improve this relationship. Several suggested approaching the issue of political inclusion through the lens of women's empowerment more broadly. This might be pursued through sensitisation of LAC stakeholders about the potential benefits of women's involvement in public life, beginning in sectors that respondents considered 'women-friendly' such as education, which could have follow-on effects in other areas of gender-sensitive service delivery.

Interviewees also suggest that Islamist groups or actors are resistant to women's participation in service delivery. Groups in Aleppo, Idlib and Rif Damascus all reported problems with intimidation or and active hostility from Islamist groups, including both armed opposition groups and religious authorities. An interviewee, active in both Homs and Rif Damascus, reports that the presence of Islamist stakeholders has "made it difficult for women's groups to be created and openly active." The increased presence of Islamist actors in certain areas appears to have worsened operational constraints on women's involvement in service delivery and is increasingly reducing the mobility of women service delivery actors. This reduction in mobility marks a significant change in the ability of women to deliver services in certain parts of Syria over the past 12 months. While this trend relates specifically to areas of Islamist control and is not common across all areas of Syria, women presently operating in such environments are facing increasing levels of harassment and intimidation for travelling without the accompaniment of a male relative or for not being covered, thereby limiting their ability to deliver services. This has particular impacts upon healthcare, a sector that often requires members of women's CSOs to travel to beneficiaries to provide services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrity's research demonstrates that women's groups are active in a range of service delivery sectors. particularly in meeting gaps in gender-sensitive services such as education or psychosocial support, and in delivering services that contribute to the long-term economic and political empowerment of women. Based on interviewee responses, the following recommendations for engagement aim to strengthen women's CSOs capacity to meet underserved needs and to build on existing areas of service delivery strength; enhance their institutional capacity; and support the public role of women in service delivering organisations.

The below recommendations are based upon responses from Integrity's interviewees and are intended to be a rough guide of needs, priorities and potential opportunities for support.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Improve the quality of, and access to, health services

Integrity's research identifies health as an underserved area of priority for women's CSOs in Syria. Respondents recommend improving the capacity of women's groups to deliver health services (technical capacity), and the reach and access of those services (through mobile health services), with a focus on GBV-related health service needs. Options for support could include:

- Financial support to existing women's centres to employ medical staff with experience in GBV-related health needs and psychosocial support
- Training on gender-sensitive medical care provided to existing medical staff at women's organisations
- Expansion of GBV support programmes within established women's centres.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Improve the quality of, and access, to education services

Respondents identify education as a critical service need, a sentiment that corresponds with multiple external assessments by humanitarian and development actors. A UN study from October 2013 describes education in Syria currently as being "in the midst of a silent disaster."⁶ This strategy seeks to build on existing professional expertise of women in CSOs in this sector to deliver informal education services through existing women's CSO infrastructure (such as women's centres). Options for support could include:

- Training on alternative or informal education techniques for staff at women's organisations (prioritising staff with teaching experience)
- Financial support for increased numbers of teachers (informal education) at established women's centres
- Development and supply of basic education material, as well as training of trainers material (informal/alternative education) to women's centres.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Strengthen the institutional capacity of grassroots women's CSOs

Interviewees from both grassroots and umbrella women's organisations highlighted limited institutional capacity at the grassroots level as a significant constraint on improved service delivery by women's organisations. This approach would build the capacity of women's organisations at a grassroots level that have good access to local communities and have some existing organisational capacity. Respondents also emphasised the importance of utilising existing training capacity within Syrian CSOs or building Syrian CSO capacity by using training of trainer (ToT) modalities that involve Syrian CSO members. Options for support could include:

⁶ SPCR, UNRWA, UNDP, [Syria: War on Development](#), October 2013, p.6

- Technical and financial support for improved knowledge and experience with financial management practices, RBM, and development project cycle management
- Technical and financial support for the development of a ToT programme focused on financial management, RBM or project cycle
- Technical support for the development of Syria-specific institutional capacity development training material

RECOMMENDATION 4: Strengthen training and livelihoods services that support women's economic empowerment

As outlined above, multiple respondents noted skills training and livelihood support services as part of approach that they identify as empowering women within their communities, and as contributing to changing gender dynamics. For this reason, such activities currently feature prominently in the service delivery activities of women's civil society organisations. It is claimed by interviewees that these activities support immediate needs, longer-term empowerment and benefit communities.⁷ Supporting this work would seek to build on this area of existing strength for women's organisations and improve the economic independence and food security of women. Options for support could include:

- Financial support to upscale or consolidate existing skills training courses (women specific) available through women's centres
- Financial and technical support for livelihood services that supply inputs for income generating activities (e.g. seeds, livestock) for women
- Capacity development and advocacy to encourage local leaders to become involved in design of livelihood support services to build a broader base of community support

RECOMMENDATION 5: Support women in service delivery or public organisations

Multiple respondents stress that delivering gender-sensitive services in a sustainable way requires not only supporting women's groups to deliver services but supporting the role of women in service delivering organisations and public life more broadly. This acknowledges the common sources of resistance to an increased role for women, as outlined above. This approach would support initiatives that empower women to take part in local organisations and that increase the responsiveness of such institutions to an enhanced role for women as agents of change. Options for such support could include:

- Financial and capacity building support to train women in local public administration and service delivery
- Capacity training on political leadership for women involved in local public life
- Local level grants available to service delivery bodies and LACs.
- Gender sensitisation and inclusion training provided for LAC members and local leaders

⁷ For a recent summary of the theory behind this approach to gender and development, see World Bank, [Women as Agents of Change: Having Voice in Society and Influencing Policy](#), 2013



**LISTEN
COMPREHEND
RECOMMEND**