

Learning Guide: Economic Inclusion for Women in Syria

Why economic inclusion for women matters

The Syria Resilience Consortium (SRC)'s economic inclusion programming, developed and championed by SRC member CARE, and adopted and embedded by all other members, is based on the understanding that resilience-building is impossible without addressing social norms and factors that limit the ability of women and girls, and men and boys, to reduce vulnerability to shocks and stresses.

In Syria, men have traditionally been responsible for providing for their families while women manage childcare and housework. However, with the rise of female-headed households and the need for more family members to contribute financially, Syrian women are entering the workforce in larger numbers and filling roles once reserved for men.¹ They are learning new skills, forging new social networks, and changing how they view their own roles and rights.²

Community perceptions have in turn begun to change, but traditional gendered power dynamics remain deeply ingrained. A study by the SRC concluded that the biggest obstacles to women working outside the home are “custom” and “tradition”, followed by women’s inability to commute (due to poor travel conditions, insecurity, and the expectation that they should be home before dark).³ Additionally, many women said they found it difficult to further their careers because their spouses do not permit them to join work associations and business networks.⁴

Women also continue to shoulder responsibility for managing the home and children. Despite their new roles, they do four times more housework than men. About 40% of the women interviewed by the SRC suffered physical and/or mental stress from juggling roles as breadwinner and primary caregiver.

For many women, more responsibility and more autonomy has not translated to equality. Family assets and incomes are mostly managed by men -- fathers, brothers, or husbands -- as it is considered inappropriate for women to make household economic decisions if male members are present.^{5 6}

Outside the home, women face equally daunting challenges. They are often seen as less experienced and less

TRADITIONAL ROLES

NEW ROLES

RISKS



- Before the crisis, girls were expected to get married after finishing school

- More domestic and childcare responsibility especially if mother works outside the home

- Lack of education
- Underage marriage
- Deterioration of psychological wellbeing



- Expected to take care of the children and the home
- Responsible for educating and raising the new generation

- ¼ of women provide for their families
- More visible in workspace
- More likely to contribute to decision making

- Greater physical and mental harm due to double burden
- Insecurity and inability to commute to work
- Lack of employment



- Women older than 55 years cared for grandchildren and helped around the house

- Help balance household labor load and increase skills transfer to younger members of the family

- Verbal and physical abuse, especially for those with disabilities

¹ Hidden, Overlooked and at Risk: The Role of Gender, Age and Disability in Syria, SRC, 2019.

² Supporting Resilience in Syria. Women’s Experience of the Conflict and the ‘New Normal’. CARE. 2020.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barriers to Women’s Participation in Economic Activities, Northeast Syria. CARE. 2022.

⁵ Hidden, Overlooked and at Risk: The Role of Gender, Age and Disability in Syria, SRC, 2019.

⁶ Supporting Resilience in Syria. Women’s Experience of the Conflict and the ‘New Normal’. CARE. 2020.

capable than men, and therefore face greater risk of exploitation and mistreatment by business partners, employers, suppliers, and clients.⁷

How economic inclusion is being achieved for women in Syria

Women's economic empowerment grants them increased control over their own lives, allows them to better provide for their families, and contributes to the advancement of their communities. The SRC understands that ensuring that women are at the core of rebuilding the Syrian economy and society means tackling the cultural and structural barriers that prevent their access to economic opportunities while also ensuring that their risk of harm is minimized. Facilitating increased participation of women -- young and old, and those with disabilities -- in economic governance and creating a supportive environment for them to take on new roles as breadwinners in society is done through a multi-pronged approach modelled on CARE's gender empowerment framework. SRC programming works to build women's agency, while tackling social norms and power relations, and encouraging community members, institutions, and response actors to actively support inclusion of Gender Age Disability (GAD) considerations.

1. Addressing risks and barriers to women's economic participation

Central to SRC programming is a robust understanding of context and of specific vulnerabilities experienced by different population groups. This is achieved through detailed analysis (including barrier mapping in collaboration with the local community) before, during, and after implementation. The analysis informs activity design and improves targeting and understanding of specific cultural and structural barriers, social norms and power relations in a particular community or area that prevent access to meaningful economic participation across gender, age, and disability.

To facilitate practical and inclusive solutions to these challenges, SRC interventions stimulate dialogue with women, men, couples, and youth that:

- promotes women role models (in livelihoods and leadership positions);
- supports women who work as well as those who choose not to work -- maintaining emphasis on their right to power in the domestic sphere and public life;
- encourages men to be advocates in supporting gender transformation;
- ensures balanced programming that meets the needs of both men and women; and
- discourages potential backlash and resentment toward women due to these changes.

2. Building community awareness and acceptance of GAD inclusion

The SRC partners with local civil society organizations and peer organizations to promote and support the inclusion of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups in society. Along with actively advocating for inclusive livelihoods, SRC interventions build local capacities to enable women's economic governance. Community-based organizations are equipped with knowledge to model inclusive decision-making; to lead participatory needs assessments on GAD barriers; and to address these barriers. The SRC also builds capacity and synergies in the wider humanitarian sector by disseminating learning to peer organizations, UN agencies, clusters, and working groups in Syria and beyond.

3. Interventions to increase women's entrepreneurial capacity and economic governance

Supporting women-led businesses

Most of the women supported by the SRC are first-time entrepreneurs who lack formal training and business capital. The SRC supports them through technical training and business grants. Grantees are

⁷ CARE PERSEVERE: Promoting the Economic Resilience of Syrian Women Case Study – CBOs as Crucial Partners for Inclusive Economic Growth

identified via competitive selection that requires them to develop and pitch a business plan. They then receive technical training delivered by local expert businesswomen selected and trained as trainers by the SRC. Endline program evaluations show that this training and coaching has directly improved the capacity of women entrepreneurs to negotiate and enter profitable linkages with other value chain actors. It has also increased their understanding of the market, helped them identify marketing channels and use social media to reach new customers.

Establishing a network of experts to promote economic governance

Due to ongoing conflict in Syria, crucial market infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed and businesses development services and training opportunities are scarce. To mitigate these challenges, SRC interventions use a Training of Trainers (ToT) approach (mentioned above) to build women's economic empowerment expertise and networks. This has enabled the creation of a rich pool of local women business experts, coaches,

trainers, role models and leaders, that other interventions and organizations can draw on. It has also created formal and informal opportunities for women to meet, share experiences, and support each other.

4: Mainstreaming gender inclusion in the program cycle

GAD principles are the core of all SRC programming. Below are examples of how gender inclusion is incorporated at each stage.

Needs assessment and analysis: All SRC programming assessments and analysis are gender sensitive. Disaggregated data is collected from men, women, boys, and girls to understand the specific needs, vulnerabilities, and coping strategies of each sex and age group.

Strategic Planning & Design: The Gender Action Plan (GAP)⁸ is a tool and a process that draws on adaptation based on context, existing drivers, and lessons learnt by the SRC and peers. The SRC Theory of Change (August 2022) places



“The start-up grant allowed me to open my own business of maintaining generators and rewinding engines. I’ve become successful and confident, and can cover all my family’s needs. I’m also a role model for other women in my town as the first woman to enter a male-only profession.”

– Hafsa, (name changed 32, mother of four.

Hafsa’s husband used to repair refrigerators and rewind engines. After the crisis, the business became too costly to run and he closed shop. With no other income, the family fell into poverty. Hafsa, tried to persuade her husband to reopen his business, but he refused.

Having seen him work, Hafsa was sure she could run the business on her own. She turned to her relatives but no one would help. Then Hafsa heard about a livelihoods support program offered by SRC member, the International Rescue Committee. She joined, took courses on financial management and business development and received a start-up grant. With the grant, she opened what is now a profitable business. Hafsa has even expanded her services to offer training for other women wanting to join the profession.

⁸ As developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)-
https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2018iasc_gender_handbook_for_humanitarian_action_eng_0.pdf

greater and more specific emphasis on inclusion of women and persons with disabilities. This is reflected in each resilience pathway targeting individuals and households (e.g. agency & relations) in addition to their communities and the wider enabling environment (e.g. relations & structures).

Implementation: Previously, SRC members and implementing partners used their own sets of socio-economic vulnerability criteria for participant selection. To address potential inconsistencies, SRC developed its own gender minimum standards tool to be used by all members.

Monitoring & Evaluation: Monitoring data against the programming log-frame is disaggregated by sex for all program indicators and by disability for most indicators. Monitoring data and learnings feed into project implementation while final evaluations inform new program design.

Throughout the entire cycle:

- A **guiding principles marker** indicates actions to be taken.
- **Gender minimum standards** are applied by all members across all programs using a tracking matrix.

Evidence and impact of women's economic inclusion from SRC programming

Evidence from the endline evaluation of SRC's women's economic governance program demonstrate its strengthening of gender equality based on the CARE gender equality framework⁹ for building agency (e.g., skill development, building confidence, social connections & providing inputs); changing relations (e.g., awareness raising, challenging norms, targeting women); and transforming structures through its achievement of

95% of its target indicators, including intermediate and immediate outcomes.¹⁰

Building agency: Around 83% of women-owned businesses surveyed demonstrated increased contribution to their household income.

Changing relations: About 75% of women surveyed at the end of the program were participating equally in household financial decision making, compared to 25% at baseline.¹¹

Transforming structures: At least 96% of those who attended the GAD awareness sessions took action to reduce barriers.¹²

While eradicating GAD inequalities and barriers to inclusive economic governance is a long-term process, the SRC is encouraged by the results achieved. Our experience shows that a more meaningful and sustainable role for women and persons with disabilities in economic governance can be achieved through comprehensive programming that builds their skills and capacities to contribute, while tackling social norms and encouraging decision-making platforms to become open, accessible and willing to be steered by all viewpoints.

About the SRC: *The Syria Resilience Consortium was formed by six International NGOs to equip individuals, families, and communities in Syria with tools and skills for a better economic future. Between 2016 and 2023, the SRC assisted 2.98 million people across the whole of Syria to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.*



⁹ See CARE's *Gender Equality, Women's Voice and Resilience – Guidance Note for Practitioners (2016)* for full details of CARE's Gender Equality Framework. <https://careclimatechange.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Gender-Equality.pdf>

¹⁰ Outcomes centered around female participation in economic governance, equal HH decision making (HH income, sale of productive assets, business management), meaningful participation in community decision making, contributions towards HH income,

reduction of GAD barriers within communities, awareness raising & trainings.

¹¹ CARE PERSEVERE: Promoting the Economic Resilience of Syrian Women Case Study

¹² Promoting Economic Resilience of Syrian Women (PERSEVERE) Annual Project Results Report (April 2020-March 2021).

https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/PERSEVERE-Y2-Annual-Project-Results-Report-Mar2021_Final.pdf