

September 2014

How the crisis is altering women's roles in Syria

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The significance of women as both distributors and recipients has been pivotal to the implementation of humanitarian assistance but also points to the burgeoning of a new social dynamic that has come about as a result of the upheaval caused by the war.

A longstanding concern in Syria is the scarcity of international NGOs physically present inside the country. In part because of this, a significant amount of the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict has been spearheaded by local organisations and networks of civilians. Out of sheer necessity, Syrian women have become actively involved, transforming themselves into agents of change.

“Our lives were predictable [before]. We all knew the beginning, middle and end of our stories. Then this conflict occurred, and it has turned everything on its head. I can never go back to doing what I did before; I can never be so meek and ordinary,” says a 40-year-old translator and English lecturer who is now responsible for emergency assistance distribution for up to 10,000 families per month in Aleppo. “Now I know Aleppo and Aleppans like never before. This forced interaction with people I would otherwise never have met has changed my whole outlook.”

In besieged areas women also take risks regularly to help smuggle medicine or food past checkpoints as they are able to pass through unchecked by authorities on occasion, although if caught their punishment is severe. Women have become a vital supply-line in these instances, crucial to the survival of other civilians.

The vast majority of the nine million Syrians in need are displaced persons, and the women of these internally displaced families have undergone a complete turnaround of traditional roles within their family and community structures. Women from poorer communities, who were more or less confined to roles within the home, are now often the

only able adults in the home, left to support themselves, their children and elderly persons in their family. For women from rural areas who lived on subsistence farming, their displacement into urban areas has left them not only without their means to daily survival but in an entirely new context where their skills are not sufficient to ensure survival. Women are now involved in activities where they were never seen before, and livelihoods projects have been in high demand in an attempt to provide an alternative income to women using skills they already have.

Within Syria, many children have been out of school for two to three years. Using a mother-to-child centred model, training is being provided to equip mothers with techniques to encourage their children to learn even if they are mostly at home. Many women from rural or lower-income communities are illiterate or only attended primary school and are taking advantage of educational support offered to women as a response to the crisis. Through mothers being enabled to enhance their literacy skills and to be active in their children's education, the development of children who would otherwise lack any learning support structure continues.

Ignorance amongst these women spans more than illiteracy in terms of reading and writing. They are unaware of basic health and hygiene precautions to be taken in poor living conditions that are crucial to ensuring the health of their children and themselves. Prior to the escalation of the conflict, these women were able to rely on a health system that was widely accessible and freely available. However, the near collapse of the health sector in Syria means that a vital link in their lives is now missing. Local organisations are stepping in to fill this gap by providing direct

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services in clinics or medical facilities, as well as by ensuring women are informed about basic hygiene, potential risks to themselves or their families, and the availability of professional health-care assistance.

Although the development of events has led to a shift in gender roles in society, it has not been a total overhaul. In areas where conservative forces have gained control, women's independence has been curtailed.

With a few exceptions, women by and large have not taken up arms in the conflict, yet they have borne much of the brunt of the war

physically, psychologically and materially. The significance of women in resisting the logic of war that at present threatens to engulf Syria is undeniable. Women who have been engaged in humanitarian efforts in one way or another should be active participants in any possible re-initiation of a peace process. Their commitment to surviving the war in a non-violent manner sets them apart as advocates for an inclusive society.

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Protection in Europe for Refugees from Syria – RSC Policy Briefing, September 2014

This report considers the response of European countries to the refugee crisis in the Syrian region. The authors, Cynthia Orchard and Andy Miller, provide an overview of the European reaction in general, brief summaries of the responses of selected countries (Germany, Sweden, Norway, Bulgaria, Greece and Italy), and a more in-depth case study of the UK.

While the authors applaud both the humanitarian efforts to assist refugees and the resettlement that is ongoing, they believe that the primary aim of the

European response – to contain the crisis in the countries neighbouring Syria and to reinforce Europe's borders – is unsustainable. The report recommends that European countries implement a Comprehensive Plan of Action for refugees in the countries neighbouring Syria, comprising three main components: activation of a regional temporary protection regime, expanded resettlement, and the development of other legal routes of entry into European countries.

Online at <http://tinyurl.com/RSC-Syria-PolicyBriefing-2014>