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Understanding women's experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict

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Understanding women's experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict: the case of Syria

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Abstract

Political conflicts create significant risks for women, as new forms and pathways of violence emerge, and existing patterns of violence may get amplified and intensified. The systematic use of sexual violence as a tactic of war is well-documented. Emergent narratives from the Middle East also highlight increasing risk and incidence of violence among displaced populations in refugee camps in countries bordering states affected by conflict. However, much less is known about the changing nature of violence and associated risks and lived experiences of women across a continuum of violence faced within the country and across national borders. Discussion on violence against women (VAW) in conflict settings is often stripped of an understanding of the changing political economy of the state and how it structures gender relations, before, during and after a conflict, creating particular risks of violence and shaping women's experiences. Drawing on a review of grey and published literature and authors' experiences, this paper examines this underexplored dimension of VAW in political conflicts, by identifying risk environments and lived realities of violence experienced by women in the Syrian conflict, a context that is itself poorly understood. We argue for multi-level analysis of women's experiences of violence, taking into account the impact of the political economy of the wider region as shaping the lived realities of violence and women's response, as well as their access to resources for resistance and recovery.

Keywords: gender, conflict, violence against women, political economy of violence, Syria

Introduction

The concept of armed conflict and the practice of warfare are both gendered. Conflict takes place in a culture that assigns different roles and values to men and women, thereby impacting their lives differently. Furthermore, the gendered structures in a society get reinforced during wartime. (1)

Political conflicts create significant risks for women, as new forms of violence emerge and existing patterns of violence often get amplified and intensified. The use of sexual violence as

a tactic of war, such as military sexual slavery and forced prostitution, (2) is well-documented, for example in the genocide in Rwanda, the civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia and DRC Congo, the war in Iraq, (3) Palestine (4) and in the context of the current Syrian conflict. (5,6)

Emerging narratives on violence in conflicts in the Arab region describe increasing risks and incidence of interpersonal violence among displaced populations in refugee camps located in the neighbouring countries. (7) This suggests that trans-border movements, while increasing risk of violence, create spaces, albeit limited, for women to bring forward gender issues of violence but also equality hitherto overlooked.

In the current Syrian conflict little is known about the patterns of violence and associated risks that women face, in their daily lives both within the country and across national borders. Furthermore, there is limited assessment of the gendered nature of conflict and how pre-existing gender relations shape risks and vulnerabilities.

This paper examines the underexplored dimension of violence against women (VAW) in the context of the ongoing conflict in Syria; an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with significant political, economic and social implications on a global scale. The paper considers the gender relations in the country before the conflict and relates these to the emerging patterns and magnitude of risk of violence during the conflict. We adopt a political economy framework to analyse how gendered dimensions of the conflict interact with market and state structures to reinforce gender inequalities and expose women to particular forms of violence, a perspective that has been largely ignored in the mainstream literature on VAW.

The intensity and complexity of this conflict serves as the backdrop against which we examine VAW in Syria. We first briefly outline key characteristics of the Syrian conflict and trace key historical shifts in the governance and political economy of modern Syria, along with their implications for women's status and gender relations. We then describe emerging trends in violence against Syrian women and examine the environments, including the conflict zones, place of residence, and detention centres, where women face specific risks. We outline both dominant and counter narratives of violence in the Syrian conflict.

This paper is developed through the authors' critical reflection on and analysis of two key data sources. First, a review of published and grey literature, mainly reports, human rights assessments by international and local NGOs, and media reports, analysed against key themes identified in the political economy framework. Second, and more significantly, the paper draws on the substantial field experience of the primary author, a Syrian researcher with longstanding

experience in humanitarian work in Syria and Iraq (including multiple field missions undertaken in Syria for different humanitarian organisations).

The Syrian conflict: key characteristics

Set off by the Arab revolutions, the Syrian uprising in 2011 escalated to a violent confrontation and by the summer of 2012 had become a proxy war between regional and international powers. (8) The intensity of violence and the indiscriminate nature of the conflict are evident in the death toll and the massive displacement of the population. The latest data indicate that 11.5% of the population have been either killed or injured, with the mortality rate reaching 10 per 1000 and the number of injured people expected to reach 1.88 million in 2015. (9) The conflict has led to an estimated 3.11 million refugees and 6.36 million displaced within Syria, most of whom are still on the move, (9) and 13.5 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance. (10)

One of the complexities of the Syrian conflict is the diversity of fighting actors. Broadly speaking, the main actors controlling geographical territories within the country are: the Syrian regime, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Syrian Opposition armed groups.[1] The Opposition armed groups constitute a broad category that includes different militias and Islamic brigades, with diverse ideologies, political goals, and military structures, that often fight as part of transient military coalitions. The formation of such coalitions is dependent on many factors including agreement of the regional powers, and the scale of military operations conducted around big cities under the control of ISIS or the Syrian Army. These regional agreements, led by Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, reveal another dimension of the complexity of this conflict, as these countries continue to be main sponsors of the fighting actors, and use substantial religious and sectarian discourses to justify political involvement. This intersection between ideologies is resulting in an ~~fanatic~~ extremist discourse which impacts trends of violence in general, and against women in particular. In addition to the regional support to the Opposition armed groups, international support comes from the USA, France and the UK. Even in the territories under the control of the Syrian government there is high dependence on informal militias to control the population (12). In addition, the Syrian government depends on regional parties like Hizbullah, and Iraqi and Iranian militias, and

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Commented [A2R1]: Fanatic is more abstract, I didn't use extremist cause it is very essentialist to the security debates and we are trying to shift that

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[1] These include, but are not limited to: Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamic brigades[1] such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Jeish Al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawhid, Al Nusra Front (affiliated with *Alqaeda*) (11).

internationally mainly on Russia. The international powers' investment in the conflict brings an additional layer of complexity. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have entered the conflict scene more recently, and the latter has attracted worldwide attention for human rights abuses and war crimes.

The widespread international and regional involvement in Syria has created fragmentation among conflicting parties and weakened the political ground of Syrian social and economic institutions. This has created a political vacuum with unprecedented implications for international relations. (13) The unstructured plurality of actors and the conflation of regional interests have significant implications for women, as different fighting parties use different tactics to control and subjugate the population.

Violence against women in Syria

Reports on violations of women's human rights at the beginning of the uprising showed that government security and military forces systematically used VAW as a tool of political repression and to intimidate communities and political activists. (14) Since 2012, the point at which the uprising shifted towards militarisation, the Syrian population has witnessed the normalisation of an unprecedented level of violence, instituted by the various actors. This defining characteristic of the conflict has particularly severe implications for Syrian women.

Both the scale of violence and the multiplicity of actors grew as the conflict progressed, exposing Syrian women and girls to a wide spectrum of violence, including kidnapping, forced disappearance of women political activists and female members of families of male activists, executions, rape and other sexual violence, torture, enslavement, forced recruitment by militias, forced detention and denial of fair trials. Other less direct pathways that put women at risk of violence include forced displacement and migration, forced and early marriages in refugee communities in neighbouring countries, and denial of basic services including healthcare (6, 14-16).

To understand more fully the gender implications of the conflict, it is vital to consider the political, social and economic context that predates the conflict and as it is shaped by it. While the conflict heightens women's vulnerabilities to violence and shapes their response and recovery, structural dimensions of gender inequality and patterns of disadvantage were established well before the conflict started in 2011. A full understanding of how conflict shapes women's lived realities and risks to violence must therefore be historically located in gender relations and the social, political and economic context in Syria. In order to illustrate how wider

political and economic structures shape and reinforce the distribution of risks and opportunities for women, both before and during the conflict, we adopt the feminist political economy framework developed by Jacqui True. (17, 18) In this approach, she argues, a feminist political economy method corrects the gap in contemporary gender-based violence and security studies that fail to examine how political, economic and social structures "both condition and heighten women's vulnerability to violence". (p44) Three elements of the framework (p45) lend to our analysis and are discussed in corresponding sections in the paper. These are:

i) The macro-economic environment and neoliberal policies adopted by the state and their implications for gender relations;
ii) Gendered division of labour across public and private spheres and gender relations in the household, which we argue are inextricably linked to mediations by the state and the macro-environment;
iii) The gendered dimension of the conflict itself, where we demonstrate how struggles to control power and productive resources have valorised particular forms of masculine aggression.

The Syrian state and the political economy of gender relations

Syria gained independence from the French occupation in 1946 after a 20-year long struggle against repression of revolutions and the independence movement. (19) Women had a central role in the independence movement, and remained politically active in the decades that followed until the political space was shut by the end of 1970s by the militarised state. (20) After coming to power via a military coup in 1963, the Ba'ath party adopted universal social policies in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in significant improvements in the second half of the 20th century in the country's development indices, primarily health and education, but also in public sanitation, water, energy and infrastructure. (21) Developmental progress was reflected in higher life expectancy, decreases in infant and child mortality, and increased school enrolment among boys and girls. These developments were attributed to the stability brought about by the Ba'ath party that came to power after a series of military coups and counter coups. (22) The accumulated benefits of development translated to better health and educational attainments and opportunities for Syrian women (23,24) who were seen as essential for economic development and came to occupy spaces in the public sector that offered social[2] and economic security. (23) However, these improvements were substantially overshadowed by growing inequalities, across socioeconomic, regional and geographical strata and gender,

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[2] Women workers preferred public sector employment as it guaranteed maternity leave and child benefit.

Commented [A3]: I suggest 'uprisings' rather than revolutions –it only becomes a revolution when it succeeds? Or, 'struggle of the independence movement against repression'.

Commented [A4R3]: In the Syrian history it is labelled revolutions, and it did succeed in making the French army leave the country.

disproportionately affecting women and children in less developed provinces and rural areas. (24-26)

Several factors, most notably the unstable political and economic environment and wars in the Arab region, reduced social spending and resulted in a collapse in the economy and services, reflected in households' living standards, in the 1980s. (27) A stagnant phase followed economic collapse as the government embraced neoliberal economic policies in the late 1990s, leading to commercialisation of social sectors and withdrawal of subsidies. (28) This neoliberal model became more pronounced in the 2000s, especially after the death of President Alassad and his son's succession as president. Poverty ~~in relative terms~~ increased, alongside geographical and social inequalities, and several attempts at political and institutional reforms were obstructed. (26-28)

Household data from 2000 show that an unprecedented number of women and young men were dropping out of the labour market. Women's employment in the agriculture sector dropped substantially (from 54% to 22%) in this period, driven by drought, increasingly neoliberal policies, and lack of any legal and social protection for workers in the formal and informal sectors. Overall, female participation rates decreased from 21% in 2001 to 12.9% in 2010, much faster than the decline in male participation in the same period. (29) In 2010, 85% of women aged >15 years, who ideally should be part of the labour force, were ~~housekeepers~~housewives, excluded from the labour market. (29) Nasser and Mehchy (29) found marital and educational status to be key determinants of women's participation in the labour market as more married women left it in the decade before the conflict. These trends implied greater economic and social dependence on men and on their families, and increased vulnerability to violence during conflict. The social, economic, and health inequalities were most visible among women in lower income quintiles, agricultural workers, mothers in rural areas and the slums of Damascus and Aleppo, and in the less developed governorates like Der Ezzor and Hassaka. (26) Women in these groups had poor access to reproductive and other health services, less control over reproductive decision-making, and higher rates of illiteracy and school drop-out. (24-26)

There has been limited exploration of how these development indices reflect and relate to the shifts in gender dynamics in Syrian society. Even scarcer are analyses of how gender relations are affected by the state apparatus and its relationship with its citizens. In the case of Syria, this should include an examination of the impact of state suppression of political opposition, both

Islamic and socialist, on women's status. This is especially important since the natural political allies of the ruling party were the traditional Islamic elites[3], and consequently, powers were delegated to religious institutions, giving them a growing say in governing women's lives. (30, 31) Sharabi (32) makes reference to the confluence of religion and patriarchy in the concept of "neopatriarchy" in relation to Syria and other states in the region. Power in such contexts, he argues, is bound to religion and kinship structures, and appropriated by the State to reinforce its rule.

Annika Rabo (23) argues that a focus on gender is imperative for the analysis of (changing) relations between the state (and its apparatus) and civil society, since notions of "'good' men and women are important symbols in political struggles".

Women, state and citizenship in Syria: implications for gender relations

Women (and 'family') have had a central role in Syrian society, and were used symbolically, in the modernising discourse as well as to reinforce cultural traditions in the society. Formation of the post-independence 'modern' Syrian state and national identities rested on a narrative that decried traditional gender norms and ideologies as "remnants of a patriarchal order which the party strives to eliminate". (23) Syrian women's political struggle and their vital participation in the independence movement gained them the right to vote in 1949. However, as Makdisi (33) argues, women had to make difficult choices to maintain positions within the (largely patriarchal) nationalist movements and to prioritise state building and national security over furthering women's agendas in socio-economic, civil and political spheres. Contrary to the rhetoric of women's centrality to state agendas, civil and political life was constrained and public spaces largely dominated by the ruling Ba'ath Party through the 1960s and 1970s. This forced women within the party to retreat and form the *General Women's Union* that was limited in practice to mobilising women supporters to provide political legitimacy for the Ba'ath party. The exclusive political representation of women in the *Union* did not address the issue of equality and instead emphasised that women's participation was their duty to serve the economic development objectives of the State. Such marginalisation in political participation has resulted in women holding less than 12% of parliamentary seats. (34) Furthermore, while

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[3] The main ally was a coalition of traditional and religious parties that grew in Syria, Iraq and Egypt to contain and counteract the Muslim Brotherhood opposition, breaking the alliance and gaining legitimacy among people and religious institutions.

Syria acceded to CEDAW in 2003, the government entered reservations to several articles related to rights to nationality, mobility, divorce, inheritance, reproduction and protection from child marriages. It is therefore no coincidence that, at the time the conflict broke, Syria was ranked 124 out of 135 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (2011), below other neighbouring Arab countries. (35)

Before the conflict, the public sphere was dominated by an old state bourgeoisie, religious orthodox elites, new corporate institutions, and militarised institutions hostile to and violent against women. Embedding of religious institutions in political power ~~became regressive~~ had was regressive ~~results~~ for women and contradicted claims of "modernity", (30) and the private sphere became more repressive and violent. Changes in the social and economic milieu brought constraints on women's public participation and their access to economic opportunities, and thus greater dependence on the male members of their families. As women's position became increasingly defined by their family ties, their bargaining power in the household reduced, thereby increasing their vulnerability in situations of conflict. (36)

In the ongoing struggle for power within and between the state and military factions, women became key political actors during the uprising, during militarisation and, as both victims and perpetrators, in the war. (37, 38) Through the Syrian uprising in 2011, women had central roles in mobilising the non-violent movement. Women gained recognition in communities as they established networks of legal, political and social support for different grass root organisations. Sadiki refers to this phase as women gaining "acknowledgment and respect" from their male companions in mobilising the nonviolent movement and "becoming citizens". (39,p278) Female political actors are still considered key to the Syrian uprising, albeit overshadowed and challenged by the extent of violence that signifies the conflict. Emerging patterns of violence in the Syrian conflict are shaping women's risks and opportunities and defining their participation in both "public" and "private" spheres in the future, particularly given the orthodoxy of religious and militarised institutions that are stepping in to fill the governance vacuum in affected areas. (40)

Gendered dimension of conflict and emerging patterns of VAW

In the Syrian conflict, women's experiences of violence are shaped by the changing status, roles and social relations of women. These changes are brought about by displacement, loss of economic and social capital (such as family members and loved ones), and above all, changing

gender roles and dynamics in the struggle between state and non-state actors to gain political control. The interaction of these factors creates new vulnerabilities, risks and opportunities, influencing women's coping tactics. The pattern and experience of violence are not uniform across the country or among different population groups.

Patterns of VAW before the crisis in Syria remain undocumented and are aspects of Syrian society rarely discussed. (41) Domestic violence and sexual harassment are portrayed as private issues shaped by patriarchal beliefs around men's rightful control over women's sexuality. Challenging the privacy of VAW and attempts to address or report it have therefore often been constructed as betrayal of family and violation of social cohesion. (42, 43)

However~~,~~ the onset of conflicts and political violence in the Arab world sheds~~ a~~ new light on the ~~old/new~~ phenomena of the culture of shame and silence in response to violence against women. A~~Traditionally, and a~~cross the region, women's silent coping with violence has ~~also came to~~ acquired ~~symbolise~~ symbolic meaning of "national resistance" for women. (44) ~~Earlier a~~Accounts of the conflict in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Iraq reveal how private issues are rendered public, and thence the family shame becomes a 'national' or territorial shame that would invoke and fuel more violence and acts of revenge. (44) This discourse is evident in several testimonies presented in the media, and in assessments of women's situation in refugee camps where survivors of violence stated: "[reporting] would only make things worse". (45) Thus, the contours of the culture of silence and shame are reinforced and magnified in conflict. Further understanding of the symbolism of this silence on VAW in shaping the discourse of national resistance during ~~wars and~~ conflicts in the region is necessary and has implications for post-conflict state-building efforts.

The gendered dimension of violence is intimately connected to patriarchy and ~~the impact of~~ how conflict ~~on~~ affects the gendered distribution of economic and social resources. Poverty levels in Syria reached 83.5% in 2015 and extreme poverty was estimated at 69.3% with wide geographical spread and concentration in conflict areas, (9) increasing women's and children's vulnerability and forcing them into the informal labour market and the war economy. The highest poverty rates were in Raqqa (which is under the control of ISIS), reaching 91.6%, followed by Der Ezzor, Idleb, Homs and Rural Damascus which are the most affected by the conflict. The 2016 SCPR report on the impact of the crisis reveals how national and external resources are being directed to the economy of violence and redistributed by the fighting actors on the ground. Economic and political insecurity and social exclusion directly increase the risk

Commented [A10]: This section is very ambiguous. What or whom are women resisting when they maintain silence? Patriarchy? Acknowledging that they have been shamed? Acknowledging that their oppressors have the power to oppress them? Trying to disguise their shame? It's very unclear. And are women trying to calm violence and prevent retaliation by bearing their shame silently, or is it their personal situation which would only be made worse by reporting?

Commented [A11R10]: What is implied here is that in this context 'individual honour' and justice becomes secondary to national sovereignty and movement issues, and women choose to cope silently with violence (at interpersonal level or conflict related) in the context of a larger purpose i.e. political freedom and national resistance.

However, given the dearth of empirical evidence (and since we are relying on experiential evidence of authors 20 + years of research in Syria) we are not stating this as 'fact'. The research cited here is indicating women are "making this choice" so it is beyond the scope of this piece to argue against this specially with no primary data.

of incidence and normalisation of VAW, (18) entrapping women in potentially violent environments at home and in the public sphere. With a collapsing social sector and services, women lose access to support services such as primary health care and subsidies to food and medication. Continual attacks on health facilities and targeting of health workers deprive the population of basic and lifesaving services such as those provided to pregnant women or rape survivors. (46-48)

Socio-economic and political insecurity evokes a backlash against women's rights, often "expressed through violence and articulated in the form of defending cultures and traditions". (49,p763) While the increase in sexual and physical violence against women (and men) as a direct result of armed conflict is well documented, much less is known about other forms of violence women are subjected to and the continuum of risks they face.

In conflict, women are seen as assets and are severely commodified. (50) We explore in the following section how women are being targeted and used as commodities in the conflict zones, at the check points, and in detention centres.

In the conflict zones, which means nearly every populated area in the country, women fighters are actively recruited by Kurdish groups, the Syrian government army and militias, and to a lesser degree by opposition groups. Such recruitments (and involvement of women in military forces) are often hailed by the Western media as challenging gender frames within traditional Syrian society, and showing women as active participants fighting alongside their male counterparts (for instance, Zulver, Aljazeera 2014 focus on Kurdish female fighters). However, the circumstances in which those women soldiers are recruited remain largely undocumented. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (2015) documented the abduction and forced recruitment of 69 women (including 34 under the age of 18) by Kurdish militias. (52) Underlying such recruitment is a tactical approach, used by both the Syrian regime and the different opposition parties, that draws extensively on religious beliefs and social constructs of sexuality to shame and emasculate Muslim male fighters. (53-56) For example, women fighters are recruited by Kurdish militia against ISIS given the belief that being killed by a woman would deny one a place in heaven.[4] Civil society networks reported coercive recruitment of children and juveniles in the Democratic Union Party PYD, but also among Opposition armed groups and pro-government militias. (52,58) Further, several cases of female suicide bombers

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[4] Such statements were used widely by the media; the latest by the Independent Newspaper with the title: "ISIS are afraid of girls", (57) in return framing the celebration by Western media of women recruits within an orientalist discourse.

have been reported, associated with the view that women are trained not to be "captured alive to avoid the shame of rape and sexual enslavement". (59)

It is important to note that since independence, the formal Syrian military forces have always included a small percentage of women. However, data on women fighting among the supporting militias, also referred to as "Assad female fighters", (60) are limited and their concentration in Damascus and Homs warrants attention as these might reveal important information (e.g. their place of residence, extent of coercion in their recruitment practices) specific to militias located in these areas. Women fighting for the opposition are fewer, limited to specific regions, the last being Aleppo, where recruitment was reportedly driven by ideological and religious factors. (61) Contrary to claims that such enrolments are voluntary and determined by religious and sectarian factors, the situation is more complex and is mediated by economic and social factors such as women losing their male partners to violence. Little is known of the social, economic, religious, and ideological drivers and how these intersect with residence (rural-urban), and ethnicity, among others. For instance, pre-conflict economic and social indicators demonstrate substantial vulnerability of women in less developed areas like Hassaka (where most of the Kurdish female fighters are being recruited), and in rural and urban slums of Aleppo, in addition to Homs and Lattakia. (24, 25) Such understanding is vital to knowing the differential vulnerabilities and experiences of women.

Military occupation and place of residence are other important determinants shaping the risk to violence. Vile and inhumane actions in ISIS-occupied regions have received most attention in the media, as women are one of the targets of the group's atrocities and propaganda. For example, subjugation of women and girls and sexual enslavement of "non-believers" is a main feature of ISIS tactics featured in the Western media. (62) While horrifying experiences of non-Muslim women like Yizidis (in Iraq) have caught the media gaze, a wide spectrum of assaults and exploitation faced by women living in territories under the control of ISIS remain invisible. (63-65) For example, the situation of the majority of women living in Raqqa (main ISIS-controlled area in Syria) and other smaller areas across the North and North East of the country in Aleppo and Der Ezzor goes unnoticed. Women living under ISIS control are heavily isolated due to various sanctions on mobility and regular public "punishment" for women who challenge regulatory codes on mobility, sexuality, and dress. These punishments include detention, torture, or execution of women who are considered sexually active outside marriage. While these affect all women in ISIS territories in the country, regardless of age or social status, risks are most amplified for women-headed households and unmarried women and girls. (66)

Residents in opposition-held areas face indiscriminate shelling and military sieges by government forces. (58) Inside these areas, and driven by radical ideologies held by the armed groups, the civil liberties of women living under opposition regimes are increasingly restricted through enforcement of new rules. Among these was an intervention by "Jeish Al-Islam", a former leader who facilitated marriages and "fought spinsterhood" by providing financial assistance to men for marrying widows of fighters. (67)

Women are seen as valuable assets in warring regions and are used strategically to negotiate transfers through checkpoints and to secure food and other resources for their families. Reports of human rights organisations indicated different forms of assault experienced by women including transactional sex, being used as financial mules, and kidnap. (14,68) These violent economic activities are examples of when women are treated as commodities. For example, women activists facilitate transfer and border crossing of wounded personnel, humanitarian aid, and support transfer of finance. (69) This trend of "crossing" became prominent, especially after the militarisation of the conflict, and was seen as an alternative for women who lost other civil and political spaces to participate in the local across borders movement. (66)

Since men, especially young men, are recruitment targets, or are detained or used as workers, women become valuable assets for families, local communities and the different fighting parties, to secure resources, medical and military aid. Women in these areas are increasingly used as a means to reach areas besieged by the military, to cross government-controlled territory to reach opposition-controlled territory, or vice versa. (63) Such crossovers expose women to a wide range of sexual abuse and arbitrary hostilities by fighters, human traffickers and smugglers across the borders.

Moreover, due to cultural stigmatisation of gendered violence and the economic and social needs that drive these crossovers, these experiences of violence go unreported. The widespread experiences of violence in such cross-border movement, and the catastrophic consequences for women's health, wellbeing and existence, are being documented by Syrian women in a few ethnographic studies. (70) Risks are heightened for particular vulnerable groups among women: the poor, the displaced, sex workers, prisoners, and female members of families involved in the fighting. These experiences are not limited to areas under opposition control, but extend to areas under government control where an economy of violence and the collapse of institutions are prominent. Within government- and opposition-controlled areas, displaced

populations live with tremendous loss of family members, assets, and security. Little is known on trends within the displaced populations, as they live on the margins of society. (14, 63)

Violence in detention centres and the exchange of women (and men) detainees for political gains are another distinctive phenomenon of the Syrian conflict. Since the beginning, the conflict was associated with political and arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances. Human rights groups estimate that in government detention centres alone, nearly 85,000 individuals have been detained by force. (63) The circumstances of detention across all centres, whether in areas held by the opposition or State, are extremely inhumane. (71) The experiences of women detainees, however, reveal cultural stigmatisation due to the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in detention centres. Detention of women extends to the areas under the control of the Opposition armed groups, where detention of political activists is becoming a pattern, among them women activists who had large role in mobilisation during the nonviolent movement. (72) Many women are detained as political prisoners and used symbolically to pressure male fighters or activists related to them. For example, some opposition armed groups routinely offer high profile government-affiliated captives in exchange for women and girls in government detention centres and prisons. Such exchange deals are reportedly negotiated through bilateral or regional agreements overseen by other governments, especially countries like Turkey, Qatar, and Iran that have varying degrees of involvement (especially through funding) in the conflict. (73-75) Kidnapping women to exchange for prisoners and resources also serves the function of raising financial resources through ransoms demanded from regional powers. These initially included both men and women, but rapidly became exclusive to women, mostly wives and family members of fighters. (76) This is yet another aspect that perpetuates the symbolic notion of women as custodians of "honour" to generate financial revenues for the conflict.

Conclusion

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria, especially in the North and North East, substantially affects and increases women's vulnerability to violence. This article has sought to highlight ways in which state, market and military structures are implicated in creating new forms of marginalisation and exclusion and in reinforcing gender inequalities. Three key issues appear from our analysis of the conflict experienced by the Syrian population.

First, the multiplicity of actors fighting in Syria and the differences in their ideologies and agendas have varying impacts on women's risk and exposure to violence. Sexual violence is often singled out in conflict and post-conflict situations from other ongoing forms of violence. However, as the paper reveals, experiences of violence are not limited to sexual violence and rape during conflict; nor are these experiences uniform across different regions. Women are exposed to many forms of violence ranging from enslavement in ISIS controlled areas, or forced recruitment by Kurdish militias fighting ISIS, as well as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and abduction. They also bear the consequences of repressive ideological doctrines of certain militias and are coerced into marriages and other arrangements. Yet media representations and the mainstream political narratives tend to overlook these differences and present violence as a homogenous and uniform experience affecting all women living under particular regimes. Notwithstanding the differences in patterns of violence specific to warring parties and regions under siege, the underlying discourse (and ideologies of different warring parties) shaping the conflict is highly gendered and sexualised.

Second, women's risk and experience of violence is influenced by intersections of class, ethnicity, political activism, geography/ place of residence, economics and religion. Yet, violence is inadequately contextualised within the gendered structures of political and economic inequalities that shape women's vulnerability. Poverty, marginalisation and the devastating effects of conflict make women easy targets for violence, undermining any potential gains in society. These macro political and economic factors and the ongoing struggle for power and productive resources also disempower men, who tend to re-assert their power over women through further acts of violence in the public sphere, as active members of militias, or in the private sphere, as evidenced by the growing incidence of domestic violence among refugee communities.

Third, an in-depth assessment of risks and vulnerabilities needs to account for women's social location (at the intersections of multiple marginalities) and changing gender relations in society and with the state, before and during the conflict. Understanding how symbolic representations of gender and sexuality are deployed by different fighting parties, and how these shape women's vulnerabilities to violence, is important. Syrian women's political, social and economic positions suffered tremendously from the close ties between political power and institutions like religion and family. This pattern of disadvantage, created during the formation of the modern Syrian state (and rise of neopatriarchy), is reinforced by the fighting militias and regional interventions in the conflict. The stigma associated with violence at national, religious,

and family levels can further restrict women's access to the public sphere and render violence invisible~~National, religious, and stigma of violence experienced by women can further restrict their access to the public sphere and render violence invisible,~~ while reinforcing a culture of impunity and human rights violations. In particular, our paper highlights the disturbing trend of national resistance being expressed through women's stoicism and silent endurance of violence. In the making of a new state, this might imply that the principle of no justice for women will be embedded culturally, making it even harder for women to defend and act for principles of equality and recourse to justice. Additionally, it can be used symbolically to attract certain political alliances in the region, or advance political agendas that serve more traditional powers within society, hence hindering any advancement towards equality. Such pervasiveness and reinforcement of neopatriarchy will undermine the equality gains and demands harvested during state formation and the emergence of the uprising in 2011.

This paper establishes the need for further research to map and better understand these new patterns of VAW and assess the intersections of risk factors, environments and institutions that shape women's experiences. This requires generation of empirical data, and the development of longitudinal, case-based conceptualisation of the political economy of violence in conflict settings. Evidence-based and inclusive responses are essential in restoring dignity, trust, and safety among the affected.

On the policy front, it is important to consider how the invisibility of violence and the culture of impunity rampant in private, impact women's participation in the current and future public spaces. The implications of this public-private dynamic must be factored into the political solution of the conflict, the negotiation process, and the transition period. An inclusive and participatory process, involving women and men outside the military and armed groups, is key to ensuring that policy making in the peace process is both fair and sustainable. Our review shows that the impact and experiences of violence are not limited to acts of sexual violence, but extend to wider forms linked to an economy of violence (like trafficking and ransoms). These experiences are exaggerated among specific groups of women under particular regimes but are not exclusive to them. Both transitional and future economic and social policies should be universal in their protectionist approach in order to restore safety and amend inequalities. While national stability and justice in Syria are important and desirable goals in the solution of the conflict, their prioritisation over the social and economic rights and security of citizens, especially women, have destabilising and damaging consequences for the Syrian state.

Commented [A12]: Possibly change to:
The stigma associated with violence at national, religious and family levels can further restrict women's [is this women victims' ?]access to the public sphere and render violence invisible

Commented [A13R12]: Accepted and changed
not only victims but fear will affect those who were/are not victims but live in the fear / threat of violence.

The political economy of violence is based on the dynamics of incentives that fuel the conflict, ranging from new societal power, financial gains, enforced patriarchy, and the unaccountability of the informal market. These incentives perpetuate the cycle of violence and are fuelled by regional and international interests and power. Interrupting this cycle demands a comprehensive response, one aspect of which should be introducing an alternative and people-centred economy that can dismantle the incentives of violence and marginalisation.

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Résumé

Les conflits politiques créent des risques importants pour les femmes, parallèlement à l'apparition de nouvelles formes et voies de violence ainsi qu'à l'amplification et l'intensification des modes existants de violence. Le recours systématique à la violence sexuelle comme tactique de guerre est bien documenté. Des récits provenant du Moyen-Orient mettent également en lumière le risque accru et la multiplication des actes de violence parmi les personnes déplacées dans des camps de réfugiés dans des pays voisins des États touchés par le conflit. Néanmoins, la nature changeante de la violence au sein des pays et les risques associés, de même que les expériences vécues par les femmes dans un continuum de violence au sein des pays et à travers les frontières nationales sont nettement moins bien connus. La discussion sur la violence faite aux femmes dans les conflits parvient rarement à comprendre la mutation de l'économie politique de l'État et la manière dont elle structure les relations entre hommes et femmes, avant, pendant et après un conflit, comment elle génère des risques particuliers de violence et façonne l'expérience des femmes. Se fondant sur

un examen de la « littérature grise », des publications et de l'expérience des auteurs, cet article se penche sur cette dimension sous-explorée de la violence faite aux femmes dans les conflits politiques, en identifiant les environnements à risque et les réalités vécues de violence subie par les femmes dans le conflit syrien, un contexte qui est en lui-même mal compris. Nous préconisons une analyse à plusieurs niveaux de la violence faite aux femmes, en tenant compte de l'impact de l'économie politique de l'ensemble de la région qui remodèle les réalités vécues de la violence et la réaction des femmes, ainsi que leur accès aux ressources pour résister et récupérer.

Resumen

Los conflictos políticos crean riesgos significativos para las mujeres, a medida que surgen nuevas formas y vías de violencia, y los patrones existentes de violencia posiblemente se amplifiquen e intensifiquen. El uso sistemático de la violencia sexual como una táctica de guerra está bien documentado. Relatos emergentes del Oriente Medio también destacan creciente riesgo e incidencia de violencia entre poblaciones desplazadas en campos de refugiados, en los países fronterizos con Estados afectados por conflicto. Sin embargo, se sabe mucho menos acerca de la naturaleza cambiante de la violencia y riesgos asociados, y acerca de las experiencias vividas por las mujeres a lo largo de un continuum de violencia enfrentada en el país y a través de fronteras nacionales. La discusión sobre la violencia contra las mujeres (VCM) en ámbitos de conflicto a menudo es despojada de comprensión de la economía política cambiante del Estado y cómo ésta estructura las relaciones de género antes, durante y después de un conflicto, creando riesgos específicos de violencia y afectando las experiencias de las mujeres. Basado en una revisión de la literatura gris y publicada, y en las experiencias de los autores, este artículo examina esta dimensión subexplorada de la VCM en conflictos políticos, e identifica ambientes de riesgo y realidades vividas de violencia sufrida por mujeres en el conflicto sirio, un contexto que en sí no es bien comprendido. Argumentamos a favor del análisis en múltiples niveles de las experiencias de las mujeres con la violencia, tomando en cuenta el impacto de la economía política de la región en general como algo que define las realidades vividas de violencia y la respuesta de las mujeres, así como su acceso a recursos para resistencia y recuperación.