Governance Experiences in SYRIA

(Shedding Light on Women's Experiences in Local Councils in Non-Regime Held Regions)

Local Development and Small-Projects Support
March - 2020

LDSPS

This report is a part of LDSPS contribution to the **experience of local governance in Syria.** It is dedicated to all Syrian women who have never stopped striving to obtain their rights and working towards a better future. We specifically dedicate it to women in local governance and local councils **who have made tremendous efforts to make women present in this sector.**

LDSPS

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1. Executive Summary

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, women played a pivotal role in various fields; e.g. coordination of demonstrations, communication, media, relief distribution, and political action.
After the intensification of violence and resorting to militarization, women had to find alternative ways to continue their activities behind the front lines. However, despite all efforts and struggle for a greater and more effective presence of women, their presence in decision-making positions at various levels of the bodies of the Syrian opposition and civil society organizations (CSOs) is still limited and unjust.

As to the field of local governance; although many of the local councils (LCs) have recently included female members within their executive bodies, and even though the participation and the role of women in the civil movement that led to the existence of local governance structures, were noticeable and important, there are nevertheless many challenges and weaknesses that have prevented the active presence of women in decision-making positions within these structures in the vast majority of cases.

In this report Local Development and Small-Projects Support (LDSPS) presents its experience of and its observations on the approaches and experiences regarding women's participation in the LCs based on its work with about 63 LCs in different non-regime held areas in Syria; several local community surveys conducted between 2017 and the end of 2019, and some research about councils that LDSPS did not work with.

The report presents some major lessons learnt:

- Working in parallel on several axis: employment of women in the LCs, representation (women as LC members), and communities' acceptance of women's presence in LCs, led to some women reaching executive positions within the LC.
- Working with an integrated strategy with the LCs has facilitated the LCs' accepting of the presence of women, and then realizing their competencies and the beneficial impact of their presence and participation.
- Increased community awareness, CSOs' efforts and training sessions provided to the LCs, all contributed to a noticeable increase in the LCs' acceptance and the actual presence of women in the LCs.
- Female employees play an important role in community outreach, enhancing thus the LCS' communication with their communities and the development of the LCs' public relations policies.
- Supporting women's desire to participate as well as supporting women-led activities and projects resulted in raising women's participation in the public life and thus their participation in several LCs.

In addition, the report exposes some important challenges facing women's participation in local governance structures:

- The impact of de-facto forces and radical armed factions (ISIS and HTS) that prevent not only women's participation, but any real civic participation as well.
- The lack of integrated approaches to raise community awareness and increase the trust within local communities in the role and capacities of women.

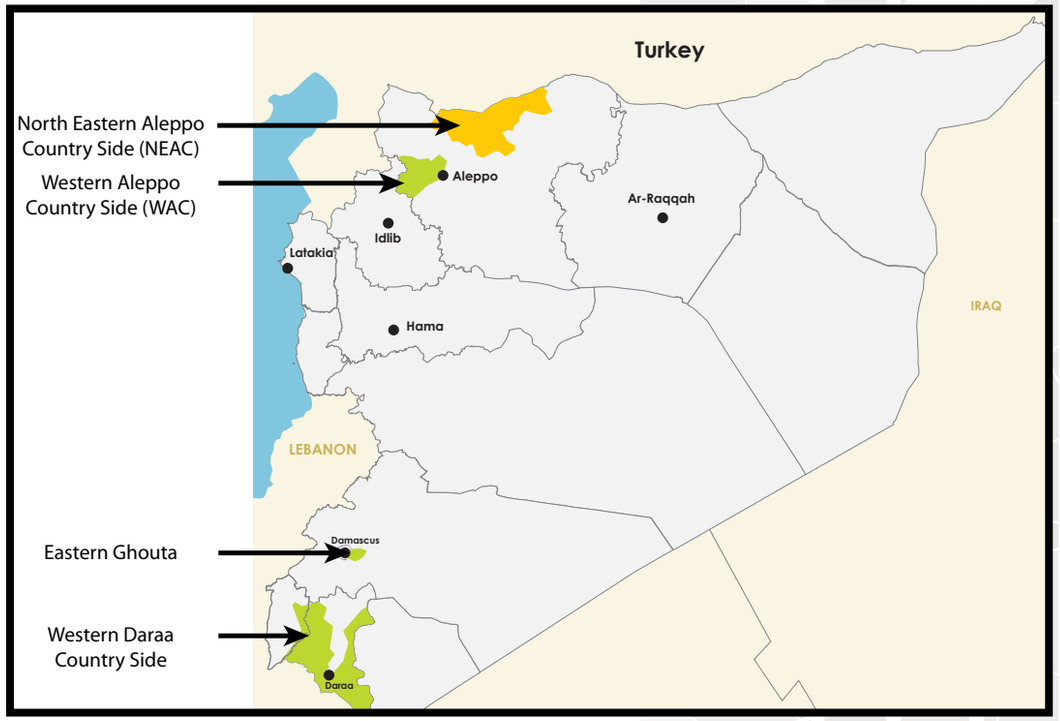
- The cultural and ideological factor, and some social norms and traditions within local communities.
- The restrictions imposed on women in the areas of education and employment, as well as the weak access they have to knowledge.
- The LCs' shortage of financial resources and/or the short-term funding provided to LCs.

At the end, the report includes the following recommendations

- The issue of women's participation in LCs requires an integrated approach that includes the local community, local civil society and LCs, with a work-plan covering several areas. LDSPS' experience in this field shows that it is possible to achieve a clear and measurable progress in this area within relatively short periods of time (about two years).
- Work with governance structures to involve women at different levels in LCs and general assemblies; in addition to working with and through local NGOs and supporting women-led initiatives, in order to have an impact on the communities.
- Continue to support women and to build their capacities, as well as providing them with the needed knowledge-acquisition spaces and capacity-building opportunities in the areas of governance and management.
- Maintain the pressure to employ women within the LCs, either in usual "typical" positions (in the Women/Family offices) and/or atypical ones (the other technical offices).
- Work on developing and applying standards and providing good working conditions to provide a supportive environment for the

presence of women within local governance structures.

- In the short term: encourage the sectoral (or profession-based) representation within the general assemblies of the LCs, as this would encourage the presence of more women in these assemblies; in addition to continuously raising the awareness of women (to run as candidates) and of the other assemblies-members on electing women as LC members.
- Make sure that LCs members are elected by general assemblies and not appointed (which gives better opportunities for women to become LC members).
- In the medium term: aiming at holding direct elections for the LCs; in addition to increasing awareness campaigns; supporting initiatives of women to become candidates; and working with women within local communities to unify their voices, to coordinate, and to network to form lobbying-forces.
- Work with donors to implement a quota-system of female participation and presence within local governance bodies and structures; in addition to providing funding for the salaries of fixed employees at the LCs (women and men).
- Continue the international support for the presence and participation of women in LCs; in addition, to continuing the support of strengthen the LCs' role as local-governance bodies emanating from the will and the needs of the local communities.



Acronyms

CSO(s): Civil Society Organization(s)
HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, previously named Al-Nusra Front
IDP(s): Internally Displaced Person (People)
ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LC(s): Local Council(s)
LACU: Local Administrative Councils Unit
LDO: Local Development Organization
LDSPS: Local Development and Small-Projects Support
NGO(s): Non-Governmental Organization(s)
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

2. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, women have played a pivotal role in various fields; e.g. coordination of demonstrations, communication, media, relief distribution, and political action. They have also played an important and essential role in providing relief to besieged neighborhoods in Homs, Damascus and its environs, and have held important leading-roles in Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), organizing civil action, in addition to medical and educational work.

After the intensification of violence and resorting to militarization, women had to find alternative ways to continue their activities behind the front lines, through the provision of medical supplies, fund-raising, organizing sit-ins, using social media to communicate the messages and the demands of the people, and documenting violations and news reporting, so that the big picture is not confined to the militarized aspect of the conflict.

Despite all those efforts and struggle for a greater and more effective presence of women, their presence in decision-making positions at various levels of the bodies of the Syrian opposition and civil society organizations (CSOs) is still limited and unjust.

It is worth noting here that women in Syria were underrepresented or their presence was just a window-dressing at various levels of the national government, municipalities, the parliament, and even unions and federations, even before 2011. This may be attributed to social beliefs with respect to the participation of women in public life, in

addition to patriarchy and the domination of the Ba'ath Party over all aspects of participation in public life, where the repression of civil society and popular movements by the state had a direct impact on the shape and orientation of women's organizations and the feminist movement before 2011.

As to the field of **local governance**; revolution forces on the ground made great efforts to reinforce local administration, and attempted to present a positive image of the application of the principles of democracy through the establishment of local councils (LCs).
Although many of these councils have recently included female members within their executive bodies, and even though the participation and the role of women in the civil movement that led to the existence of local governance structures, were noticeable and important, there are nevertheless **many challenges and weaknesses that have prevented the active presence of women in decision-making positions within these structures in the vast majority of cases.**

Most research and papers on the development of local councils (LCs) that explicitly study their action, focus on the **limited presence and participation of women in local councils**, or don't mention their presence and role. The percentage of women's representation in LCs is estimated between 2 and 4% at best. It is also noted that the selection of men for local councils was not based solely on higher technical and professional expertise, but because in most cases, they either came from prominent families, or were notables and dignitaries in their societies. In most cases, the choice was made to include men coming from different families and / or clans, in addition to representing several different ideological or political tendencies. This indicates that most LCs were aware of the need to be inclusive and to represent the various segments of society. However, the structures of the **LCs were not inclusive for women** at all. And while some regions were open to the presence and participation of women this seldom materialized. Equally, when some LCs established **offices for women affairs,** they were not necessarily operational or effective (Ghazawi 2014) (Badael 2014) (Swisspeace et al 2017).

3. About the report and the methodology:

This report presents the experience of **Local Development and Small-Projects Support (LDSPS)** and its observations on the approaches and experiences regarding women's participation in the LCs through:

- its work with about 63 LCs in different non-regime held areas in Syria
- **four local community surveys** conducted between 2017 and the beginning of 2020 in 63 cities / towns. The first and the second surveys conducted in the beginning of 2017 and 2018 included Eastern Ghouta, before the regime forces retook control of it. All four surveys conducted in the beginning of 2017, 2018, mid-2018 and the end of 2019, included the region of Western Aleppo Countryside (WAC); while the fourth survey conducted in the end of 2019 included the regions of North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside (NEAC) and Idlib. Overall, about 3,600 people were interviewed during all four surveys)
- and **some research** about councils that LDSPS did not work with (LCs of Maarat al-Numan and Saraqeb in the south-eastern countryside of Idlib, and Raqqa and Eastern-Aleppo City Councils) in order to reflect the importance of their experiences.

The report exposes some of the successful approaches that were used and helped women be included in some LCs, and other approaches that were used without giving the desired results.

A distinction between the presence of women in LCs and local governance structures will be made at two levels:

- **Presence by employment:** Several considerations and their impact on the presence and the participation of women are taken into account:

the development of the LCs, their formation mechanism, and the community's acceptance of the presence of women in LCs.

- **Presence through representation** (elected): This covers women's presence in the elective general assemblies, how this translated into their presence as LC members, and women participation in direct elections from the community, in terms of the right to vote and/or to run as candidates.

The impact of working on the **social acceptance** on increasing the presence and participation of women will also be noted.

In addition to providing LDSPS' observations and experience in supporting the participation of women through its work with LCs in different regions, the report will also explore some experiences in regions where LDSPS did not operate (Eastern Aleppo, Raqqa, Maarat al-Numan, Saraqeb).

4. The work of LDSPS and its support of women's participation in LCs:

LDSPS started to work with the LCs in **Eastern Ghouta** from the end of 2013 until the regime regained control of that region in April 2018. During that time, a cooperation with **16 LCs** took place: Douma, Harasta, Zamalka, Jisreen, Saqba, Mesraba, Irbin, Hamouriya, Kafr Batna, Al-Marj , Hazeh, Ein Tarma, Beit Sawa, Madeira, Al-Shafouniya (in addition to Rural Damascus Provincial Council, and cooperation in 2016 with the LC of Daraya in Western Ghouta).

As for the **Western Aleppo Countryside (WAC),** the cooperation between LDSPS and the LCs began in the first half of 2017 and continued until Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) took control over the area in the beginning of 2019. During that time, LDSPS cooperated with **18 LCs:** Daret Ezzeh, Atareb, Urem al-Kubra, Kafr Naha, Abzemo, Ainjara, Khan Al-Assal, Batabo, Hazano, Al-Jineh, Kafr Amah, Kafr Noran, Kafr Taal, Maaret Al-Atareb, Owejel, Taqad, and Aleppo City Council (that still managed two neighborhoods on the City of Aleppo in 2017-2019).

In the **North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside (NEAC),** cooperation began with the LCs in the region during the first half of 2018 and continues to this day. This cooperation included **25 LCs:** Akhtreen, Al-Bab, Al-Barozeh, Al-Rai, Al-Ziyadiya, Arshaf, Azaz, Baraghida, Bazaa, Marea, Marea Countryside, Dabeq, Ahtamilat, Kafra, Kaljabreen, Qabasin, Talalin, Ra'el, Tel-Aar, Kafr Kalbeen, Shamarekh, Turkman Bareh, Kafr Ghan, Sejjo, and Souran.

LDSPS cooperated with four LCs in Daraa countryside for few months only (starting the first quarter of 2018 and ending with the regime regaining control of the region in July 2018): Nasiriyah, Nawa, Shaykh Saad and Inkhil.

Partnerships of LDSPS with local councils (LCs) are made at three levels:

- **Strategic** partnerships (about 18 councils LCs): all the types of support were provided to the partner -LC during continuous periods ranging from one and a half to three years: covering the salaries of administrative staff, capacity-building (training of LCs' employees, consulting sessions, and purchasing equipments for the LCs), supporting service-provision and revenue-generating projects, and coordination and communication activities with the concerned LCs;
- **Development** partnerships (about 20 councils LCs) during which capacity-building support (training and equipment), service-provision projects and revenue-generating projects were provided to the partner-LC, in addition to coordination and communication activities with the concerned LCs, for continuous periods ranging from one to three years,
- **Cooperation** partnerships (about 25 councils LCs) during which service-provision and revenue-generating projects were intermittently provided to the concerned LCs.

These partnerships were built on different levels of commitments from the side of the concerned LCs: for the strategic partners: independence, transparency and working towards direct-elections; for the development partners, independence and transparency; and for the cooperation partners: independence.

In general, LDSPS' strategy relied on empowering the LCs, and strengthening them, their independence, their transparency, and their inclusiveness, especially with regard to the participation of women and IDPs (although we have not had the opportunity to carry out an

in-depth work on integrating the IDPs and on their participation in LCs). When analyzing the strategy of LDSPS for women's participation, we can see that it was based on working on several issues: **Employment** of women in the LCs, **representation** or women as LC members, and **communities' acceptance** of women presence in LCs.

First: Employment of women in the LCs

In most cases, the presence of women in LCs was limited to the **women's office**. This did not give women the opportunity to participate actively in the work of the LCs, with the exception of few cases, as in the LC of Maarat al-Numan, the LC of Douma, and Eastern-Aleppo City Council. On the other hand, the number of female applicants for jobs in LCs was low (note: the hiring was often done through advertising job vacancies, then receiving CVs from applicants, and finally evaluating the received applications before selecting the best candidate for the open position).

LDSPS has worked to support the employment of women in LCs at several levels, depending on the nature of each region, and the acceptability by the different communities and LCs:

1- Firstly, **breaking the "lack of women's presence" barrier** and securing the communities' and the LCs' acceptance of the presence of women in the LCs, in towns where the LCs that did not include any women (e.g. some of the LCs of Eastern Ghouta and of Western Aleppo Countryside): LDSPS urged these LCs to create Women Affairs offices. This was done through holding several meetings with them and explaining the importance of the presence of women, in addition to making the participation of women in the LCs a condition to having strategic partnerships. LDSPS succeeded in increasing the number of women in local councils in the Western Aleppo Countryside by encouraging the establishment of women affairs offices and employing women, where LDSPS, through its strategic partnerships with 5 local councils, was able to support the employment of 15 women, 3 in each council: a manager and an employee in the women affairs office, and an employee in the citizen assistance office.

2- Secondly, **breaking the "stereotyped employment" barrier** in regions where women were already present in the LCs (e.g. North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside), through successively working with several LCs to recruit women not only in Women Affairs offices, but also in other. Through its work with LCs in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside in 2019, LDSPS was able to **support the recruitment of 7 women** in technical/ administrative offices: in the LC of Azaz, one woman was recruited in the Office of Communications and Human Resources; in the LC of Turkman Bareh, two women were recruited, one in the Public Relations Office and on in the Relief Office; in the LC of Rael, three women were recruited in the Finance Office, the Relief Office and the LC's Register Office; and finally in the LC of Dabeq, one woman was recruited into the LC's Register Office.

The importance of women in these offices has been demonstrated through the visible improvement of the communication with women and local community groups and initiatives, specifically local women's groups. In addition, women's presence helped improving the ways in which local needs assessment are conducted by taking into account the needs of women as an essential factor. Furthermore, it contributed to ensuring that women have access to the relief distribution,

guaranteeing thus more equal access to the resources within the local community for women and men.

One of the approaches used by some of these councils was to have a positive-discrimination policy in favor of female applicants, where women would get additional evaluation-points when their qualification/experience were suitable for a position, to give them an advanced opportunity over their male counterparts.

3- Thirdly, **breaking the pretext that "women lack the needed experience".**

Through **the four community surveys conducted between 2017 and 2020,** the community's opinion was monitored by asking the following question "Are women allowed to be candidate for the LC's membership?" When people who answered with "no" were asked about the reasons for their replies, 51% of the answers about the reason for not allowing women to participate in LCs were attributed to social norms and traditions, 17% were "I don't know," 14% said that "women are not suited for such a job" or cited the "inability / incompetence of women" and 5% mentioned the LCs rules and procedures of selection. Although **the lack of competence and experience was rather an excuse** than a real reason (especially when considering that no real assessment of competence and experience of men were made when they became members of LCs), LDSPS worked nevertheless with partner and allied CSOs to **empower and build the capacity of women** by providing trainings and professional development sessions to them. As an example: during 2018, a vocational school for women was established and funded in Western Aleppo Countryside under the name "Women Leaders" within **"AQED" project**, in cooperation with **Kesh Malek,** a Syrian CSO, to provide selected women with the

necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to work in public institutions and administrations. This project was the first to provide such a support in the region, aiming at encouraging the employment of women in senior positions and roles. The female participants successfully graduated from the school, and some of them were even able to find jobs based on the knowledge and training they received in a relatively short period of time.

One of the objectives of the "AQED" project was to raise awareness and to increase the participation of marginalized individuals and groups in local public life, especially women. Thus, the idea of establishing a vocational school for women was born, and **22 women** were selected for enrollment in the "school", where they could receive advanced education in management and administration subjects, in order to qualify them for positions in the public and private sectors.

In 2018, these "students" attended courses on financial management & compliance, general management, human resources, English, writing proposals and reports, as well as classes on human and women's rights, gender equality, art and culture. This project was a leading project in the region; it paved the way for female participants to improve their labor market prospects.

All students were unemployed before the project, 22 women graduated from the "school", **15 of whom started work** after a year of training either as trainers, with civil society organizations, or started their own projects. Two of the students were encouraged to pursue a degree and joined the Teacher Training Institute in Atarib.

Unfortunately, the project was suspended due to the lack of funding then stopped completely when HTS and its Salvation Government

started to expand their control over the region in the beginning of 2019, which limited the possibility for women and CSOs to work there. Furthermore, since the vocational school project was a successful experience, other institutions began to think about the possibility of replicating it in other regions. The expected effect of resuming this experience or of replicating in different regions would be to help these "graduates" and other women, now and in the future, to become effective leaders in their communities, and influence other women to participate and learn as well.

Second: Representation of women as LC members

The presence of women in representative bodies is analyzed on **different levels**: their presence in electoral/general assemblies, the translation of this presence into being one of the members of the thus elected LCs, in addition to the right to vote and run as a candidate in the case of direct elections by the communities.

It is worth mentioning that, while in "appointed" LCs (formed by local dominant forces), all members were men, and while that was also the case for most of the LCs where members were elected by a general assembly, mostly due to social considerations (often general assemblies consisted of local male notables and dignitaries without any female presence), in those cases where general assemblies effectively included women, it was difficult to translate their presence into having female members in the elected council.

With the introduction of the idea and with the few experiences of direct elections of LCs by the communities in non-regime held regions, it was noted that in most cases, the number of female candidates in the local elections was low in general, or even inexistent in some regions. However, **the percentage of female voters became better with the development of the means put in contribution during the process of electing LCs.**

LDSPS strategically chose to focus its action aiming at better representation of women as LC members on having women elected through **direct elections**. Therefore, working on improving women's participation as LC members, was a step that was planned after that of transitioning the LCs to conducting direct elections.

LDSPS contributed to the organization of **a series of direct elections held in Eastern Ghouta**, in the towns of Saqba, Harasta, Jisreen and Mesraba in the **second half of 2017.**

Although participation rates in these elections remained low, and despite the fact that women were even prevented from participating in some of them (LDSPS succeeded in persuading the LC of Saqba to open an electoral center for women only a day before the direct elections were conducted in this town, while, in the case of Mesraba, LDSPS succeeded at obtaining only a commitment to allowing the participation of women in the following electoral cycle, which has never been fulfilled due to the fall of Eastern Ghouta in the hands of the regime later); the general atmosphere of the elections in all four towns and the qualitative testimonies obtained by LDSPS showed a great and promising enthusiasm. The rest of the Eastern Ghouta councils interacted with this wave. LDSPS had developed a roadmap in cooperation with the LCs of Eastern Ghouta to conduct general elections in most of the other towns (most importantly the city of Douma) during 2018. This local wave was aborted due to the military

campaign led by the regime and its Russian ally in the region which ended by the regime regaining total control of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018.

The last direct election experience was in **the city of Ainjara in Western Aleppo Countryside in late 2018**. This experience was characterized by a remarkable community acceptance; important publicity campaigns for **four female candidates**, leading to the **success of one of them** in the elections; as well as high female participation in the electoral process, a first of its kind in the history of the region, where 800 women from Anjarah and its countryside participated in the elections (Note: despite the fact that the success of the female candidate was due to the withdrawal of one of the elected members, which allowed her to be elected, this in itself is considered a progress in understanding and accepting the importance of the presence of women).

The direct elections of Ainjara were conducted with the participation and support of a group of Syrian civil organizations, including LDSPS. This experience has made important breakthroughs (despite some documented violations in the electoral process) in terms of candidates organizing themselves in joint lists not as separate individuals, in terms of the reasonably high participation rate and in terms of the participation rate of women, where the percentage of female voters in the elections conducted in Ainjara exceeded the half (while noting that part of this high percentage was due to short-comes in the electoral lists that had unrealistically high percentage of women). . As in Eastern Ghouta, LDSPS observed an impact in the form of a positive contagion in Western Aleppo Countryside region, when a group of partner LCs started discussions with LDSPS to help them prepare for direct elections

in their towns during 2019. Ainjara's experience was aborted and the direct election wave ceased when HTS controlled the region in early 2019.

Third: Communities' acceptance of women presence in LCs

There was a **clear and positive development regarding the acceptance of women's participation in LCs:** During the first three community surveys conducted by, the community respondents were asked the following question: "Are women allowed to run for membership of the LC?". 33% of the respondents of all the surveys replied with "yes" while 67% replied with "no". However, this low percentage conceals a noticeable positive development since the first survey conducted at the beginning of 2017, where the percentage of the respondents who replied with "yes" was 30%, to the later surveys conducted in 2018, where this percentage reached 45% in Eastern Ghouta and WAC , even exceeding 55% in some towns (a reminder here that the first two surveys covered Eastern Ghouta and WAC, while the 3rd survey covered only WAC, as Eastern Ghouta had fallen under the control of the regime's control by mid 2018; also, it s worth specifying that this evolution was measured mainly in the towns where LDSPS has been operating).

When people who answered with "no" were asked about the reasons for their replies, 51% of the answers about the reason for not allowing women to participate in LCs were attributed to social norms and traditions, 17% were "I don't know," 14% said that "women are not suited for such a job" or cited the "inability / incompetence of women", and 5% mentioned the LCs rules and procedures of selection.

It is important to notice here, **the negative impact of HTS' control over WAC** (the only region in which all four community surveys were conducted): the percentage of the respondents who replied with "yes" to the question "Are women allowed to run for membership of the LC ?" went down from 45% in mid 2018 (the 3rd survey) to about 10% in the end of 2019/beginning of 2020 (4th survey).

Note: The percentage of the respondents who replied with "yes" to the question in the 4th survey conducted at the beginning of 2020 was 33% in NEAC, which is somewhat surprising, because it is much lower than the level measured in WAC before HTS' ccontrol, and 39% in Idlib, which is higher, but remains lower than the levels that were observed in Eastern Ghouta and WAC in 2018(levels that were continuing to increase at that time).

In order to support enhance women's presence in LCS, LDSPS's plan included, on one hand, encouraging the emergence of women and the **community acceptance** of their presence in the public space in general. LDSPS thus supported initiatives led by women in the regions where it operated, in order to show a positive image of female leaders who have an impact in their communities (e.g. supporting the "one hand" initiative in Eastern Ghouta led by a lady); in addition to supporting initiatives aimed at bringing women together (the Women's Commission in WAC, Women Leaders in Eastern Ghouta, and Women's Support Committees in NEAC). LDSPS also put in place incentives to encourage its local partners to include women. For example, when LDSPS launched a call for proposals in Eastern Ghouta in 2017 aiming at strengthening local CSOs (within the framework of its Local Community Empowerment strategy), it included in the evaluation process of the

proposals, additional points to the score of a local CSO/initiative, depending on the level of women-participation in it (1 point for feminist initiatives/CSOs, 2 points if they have women in their management teams, 3 points for none-feminist initiatives/CSOs that have women in their staff, and 4 points if these none-feminist initiatives/CSOs have women in their management teams).

One another hand, LDSPS's plan included **supporting local initiatives** having specific objectives of **promoting the presence of women** in the local decision-making positions. For example, in WAC, in parallel with the preparation and the support of the general elections in Ainjara, LDSPS supported the creation of the **Syrian Feminist Society,** which was established as a platform to advocate the cause of women, and to provide a real and effective support to women wishing to engage in the local decision-making process., Women who founded this association saw their role in creating a lobbying group that promotes the importance of women's participation in public affairs and in raising the values of justice and equality as a key issue in the struggle of women locally. Increasing the participation of women as LC members was thus a way of increasing the presence of women in local decision-making positions.

The association organized a media campaign which included billboards in public spaces and the distribution of flyers to support and promote the female candidates in the Ainjara elections (bearing in mind that the female candidates were not members of the association), in addition to encouraging women to participate in the elections. The association also organized meetings with female candidates to

prepare and launch their electoral programs, as well as home visits and interviews for them with women from the local community. It also arranged a series of meetings between the female candidates and the local community in general, to present their electoral programs, and open public debates with the people about the local priorities and needs, and how these electoral programs can serve the priorities of women and address the challenges they face.

The association was also a place where female members and female employees in LCs in the Western Countryside could meet and exchange experiences and mutual support.

5. Analysis of other experiences

Taking into consideration the different formation mechanisms of **general (electoral)** assemblies: clan/family representation, formed from town-notables, or in some cases, based on a degree of sectoral (profession) representation; there were some cases of the later model, where a number of women were part of the general assemblies formed to elect the LCs members. Moreover, some general (electoral) assemblies of the later model managed to translate the presence of women in them into women being elected as LC members, while other failed to do so.

- A distinction can be made in terms of general (electoral) assemblies between the LCs in large cities, in which some **sectoral representation** was used, and those in towns and in the countryside, in which the representations based either on **clans/families** or on town-notables were the dominant models. When noticing that women were present (even at smaller numbers) in the general assemblies of the LCs of Raqqa, Douma, Maarat al-Numan and Eastern-Aleppo, all having some kind of sectoral representation; one can conclude that women's presence was due to their **professional representation;** meaning that it is because of women's representation within some professions, that they were present in general assemblies that had some form of sectoral representation. It can also be noted the number of women representing professional sectors in general assemblies increased in the sectors where women had won the battle for **professional legitimacy** (education, health, bar/law).
- The presence of women in the general (electoral) assemblies was translated into becoming LC-members in the LCs in certain cases, like **in**

Raqqa, Douma, and Maarat al-Numan, although not in all "electoral" cycles.

In Raqqa, for example (in 2013, after the city went out of the control of regime and before it was controlled by ISIS), the consultative meetings lasted for about two months and ended with the formation of an **expanded electoral assembly** comprising many parties, to elect a local city council. As a result, the representation in the assembly was based on three categories: a **community representation** (major clans and families, and civil society); a **"geographical" representation** (neighborhoods in the city and surrounding villages); and a **revolutionary/political representation** (political and revolutionary forces and activists' organizations).These extensive consultations that were held brought some kind of community-legitimacy to the formation of the general (electoral) assembly. After all parties agreed on the final list of nominees, the total number of the assembly members was 500. The assembly elected a woman as a member of the LC to head the Family Affairs office.

When the LC of **Douma,** "matured" into the phase of electing **technocrats** (through specialized profession-based sectoral elections), the members heading the different executive offices of the LC, were elected through a **dedicated/specialized electoral assembly for each specialized office.** Women were present within these specialized electoral assemblies as those were expanded to include all the professionals, male and female, of the concerned sector (for example, all male and female teachers were entitled to participate in the election of the Education office, so were the medical personnel who were entitled to participate in the election of the Medical office). Each

specialized electoral assembly elected the number of members that was allocated for this sector within the LC. This mechanism resulted in a rather big "overall" electoral assembly (6,000 to 7,000 voters), and gave more opportunities to women to participate in the election process and even to become LC members (in addition to the path open through the Women Affairs Office, the elections of which included women as voters and as candidates, regardless of their profession). But, despite the fact that women were allowed to run to head the specialized offices at the LC, and despite of the presence of a Women Affairs office, and of the presence of women in several specialized electoral assemblies, all of this did not translate into women becoming members of the LC until a relatively late stage. As a consequent, in 2016, women in Douma sought to run as candidates to become LC members by **forming alliances and networks.** 15 female candidates entered the elections of technocrats, and **9 of them succeeded** and became heads of 9 specialized offices.

It can be noticed that a similar alliances-process happened in the LC of **Maarat al-Numan,** but on a smaller scale. A woman was elected to run the Legal office within the LC.

- At the same time, the presence of a number of women in general (electoral, sometimes even called Shura) assemblies, did not necessarily lead to their election as LC members.

  For example, the case of the **City Council of Aleppo** (Eastern Aleppo): the general electoral assembly was relatively large, consisting of about 500 people, with a good level of women's presence. It included a representation of different professional sectors (doctors, engineers,

pharmacists, lawyers, and teachers), and a representation of different neighborhoods. However, women did not run as candidates, or were not elected to become members of the council, for a number of reasons, including but not limited to the domination of **armed factions** in different time periods (e.g. the period when ISIS took control of the region). It is worth noting that the Education Office and the Relief Office in the City Council did include women but not as elected heads of these offices, but as employees (sometimes hired on project-basis).

The fact that women did not run for the membership of the LCs, can also be attributed to the fact that they did not want to fight **additional battles** within the community, by joining some LCs struggling themselves to prove their role and competencies to their communities.

This situation could be observed in the election of the **LC of Saraqeb** in 2017 (direct elections from the community), where the despite a rather good percentage of female voters, no woman ran as a candidate to become a member of the LC. The community's high **criticism** of the previous LC discouraged some women, unwilling to carry the burden of being part of an incompetent LC. This, in addition to the norms and customs of the **patriarchal society** in the region and the lack of acceptance of the idea of women working in governance structures, all led to women renouncing from running as candidates.

- As for LCs in the countryside and small towns; the representation in general assemblies was according to the big families/clans/notables of the community. Since it was very difficult for a woman to represent her family or her clan in a society like the Syrian society; these general assemblies were restricted to men. We can take as an example here the **LC of Saraqeb** before the direct elections where, despite its important experience in terms of the LC's interaction with the community, only men could become members of its general assembly. This is another reminder that it is easier for women to reach the general assemblies of the LCs of big cities or of LCs that are more organized and effective, for which the representation within the general assemblies is to an extent "technocratic" or sectoral.

  This model of clan or family-based general (electoral) assemblies was a major barrier for women participation in LCs. It has not been tackled neither in terms of raising the community awareness, nor of working directly with the general assemblies in order to include women, nor of trying to cease this traditional family-based model or at least, merging it with a sectoral model.

- It is also relevant to notice the importance of the **individual accumulated experience** and competences of some **women-leaders**, whether within LCs, or prior to them becoming LC members. Women who were socially recognized in their communities, or who were activist during the revolution were "naturally" present in the general assemblies.

  One of the most widely shared success stories about women's participation in the field of local governance, was having the **first woman to serve as a chairman/president of a City Council** in a none-regime held area, which was the City Council of Aleppo (even if this happened after the loss of the eastern part of the city in favor of the regime, following which the City Council's mission became to look after the inhabitants that were forcedly displaced from Eastern Aleppo, and

to provide some services in the few neighborhoods that remained out of the control of the regime). Here, we can point out that this lady was previously known in her neighborhood for her social activism, especially, since the early days of the revolution in Aleppo. She also ran the Education and Social Affairs Office during the council session in 2015-2016 of the City Council. She was first elected as a member of the LC, and then she was chosen to be a member of the Executive Bureau, before she was elected to head the council.

This achievement can be considered a good indicator of women's participation, and a role model for other LCs.

Empowering women, building their capacities (whether personal or professional capacities), supporting initiatives led by women and highlighting their role in the society; are all factors that can be worked on to increase their presence in decision-making positions in general, and in local governance structures in particular.

- At the level of **general elections** and the right to **vote** and run as **candidates**, regional differences can be observed., The distinction made above between cities and rural areas can be seen here too. It was "relatively easy" for women to vote and run as candidates in large and more organized city councils (Douma, Aleppo, Raqqa before ISIS); whereas, in some towns (like Saqba and Mesraba), the participation of women in the elections whether concerning their right to voting or having dedicated electoral centers (necessary in some towns) or running as candidates to become LC members, presented real challenges.

  It can be noted nevertheless that the awareness of the LCs and the

society, and their **tendency to resort to holding direct elections** (by the community members), constituted a good opportunity for the participation of women in the LCs, even in rural areas. In the direct elections of the LC of **Ainjara**, the participation of women in the elections represented a direct example and a first of its kind. As soon as the idea of holding direct elections was proposed, an initiative was launched by female activists/ leaders of the community, aiming at having at having women elected as LC members. One can also point out here the importance of **personal knowledge and experience** of the women who launched the initiative and worked to raise community awareness and to encourage women to participate and run as candidates.

6. Lessons Learned and Challenges

Here are some of the most important lessons learned to increase women's participation in local governance structures:

- Working in parallel on several axis: **employment of women in the LCs, representation (women as LC members), and communities' acceptance of women's presence in LCs,** led to some women reaching executive positions within the LCs that went beyond the scope of the offices of Women Affairs or of Citizens Assistance, traditional positions within the LCs where women could usually be present.
- Working with an **integrated strategy with the LCs** that included: capacity building training, raising awareness, and sometimes linking support and strategic-partnering (indirectly) to the presence of women in the LCs, has facilitated the LCs' accepting of the presence of women, and then realizing their competencies and the beneficial impact of their presence and participation.
- Increased **community awareness**, CSOs' efforts and training sessions provided to the LCs, all contributed to a noticeable increase in the LCs' acceptance and the actual presence of women in the LCs; especially after providing women with trainings of the required skills.
- Female employees play an important role in community outreach, enhancing thus the LCS' communication with their communities and the development of the LCs' public relations policies, and in particular, in **reaching a greater number of women** within the local communities.
- Supporting women's desire to participate as well as supporting **women-led activities and projects** resulted in raising women's participation in the public life and thus their participation in several LCs.

Some **important challenges** remain however facing women's participation in local governance structures:

- The impact of **de-facto forces** and radical armed factions (ISIS and HTS) that prevent not only women's participation, but any real civic participation as well.
- The lack of **integrated approaches** to raise community awareness and increase the trust within local communities, and the Syrian society in general, in the role and capacities of women.
- The **cultural and ideological factor,** and some social norms and traditions within local communities (especially in small towns where the role of clans and families is predominant).
- The restrictions imposed on women in the areas of education and employment, as well as the **weak access** they have to **knowledge**.
- The LCs' shortage of **financial resources** and/or the short-term funding that is provided to LCs.

7. Recommendations

- The issue of women's participation in LCs requires an **integrated approach** that includes the local community, local civil society and LCs, with a work-plan covering several areas: supporting the employment of women in LCs; supporting local women-led initiatives; supporting women empowerment initiatives; and supporting the participation of women in direct local elections, both as voters and as candidates. LDSPS' experience in this field shows that it is possible to achieve a clear and measurable progress in this area within relatively short periods of time (about two years).
- Work with governance structures to involve women at **different levels** in LCs and general assemblies; in addition to working with and through local NGOs and supporting women-led initiatives, in order to have an impact on the communities.
- Continue to **support women and to build their capacities** (in leadership and in professional expertise), as well as providing them with the needed knowledge-acquisition spaces and capacity-building opportunities in the areas of governance and management.
- Maintain the **pressure to employ women** within the LCs, either in usual "typical" positions (in the Women/Family offices) and/or atypical ones (the other technical offices).
- Work on developing and applying standards and providing **good working conditions** to provide a **supportive environment** for the presence of women within local governance structures (e.g. having kindergartens to encourage mothers to apply for work, providing appropriate transportation for women to facilitate their arrival to the workplace, and providing separate offices and bathrooms to create

safe and comfortable workplaces for women). It may be useful to suggest implementing these standards as much as possible in the LCs and through the various projects, in order to reach a better inclusion of women in public areas (in addition to access standards for women and men with special needs that also require attention and effort).

- In the short term: encourage the sectoral (or profession-based) representation within the general assemblies of the LCs, as this would encourage and support in one way or another the presence of more women in these assemblies; in addition to translating this presence by continuously raising the awareness of women (to run as candidates) and of the other assemblies-members on electing women as LC members.
- Make sure that LCs members are **elected** by general assemblies and not appointed (which gives better opportunities for women to become LC members).
- In the medium term: aiming at holding **direct elections** for the LCs with sufficient preparation periods; in addition to increasing awareness campaigns to raise community acceptance of women's participation; supporting initiatives of women to become candidates; and working with women within local communities to unify their voices, to coordinate, and to network to form lobbying-forces that would help them in demanding their rights (similar to the Syrian Feminist Society).
- Work with **donors** to implement a quota-system of female participation and presence within local governance bodies and structures as a condition for supporting them; in addition to providing funding for the salaries of fixed employees at the LCs (women and men), as this policy

has proven to have a great impact on increasing the number and expanding the nature of women's participation in LCs.

- Continue the **international support** for the presence and participation of women in LCs; in addition, more generally, to continuing the support of strengthen the LCs' role as local-governance bodies emanating from the will and the needs of the local communities.

8. Conclusion

This report has provided a **partial overview** of different experiences related to the presence of women within local governance structures in Syria, based on a **practical experience** over a period of 6 years, in which L ocal Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) cooperated with **63 LCs in different non-regime held regions** (except SDF-held areas where LDSPS did not have any presence), at **multiple degrees of engagement**. During this period, LDPSP worked directly work with the LCs and conducted several local community surveys. It observed and used different mechanisms and levels concerning women's involvement and presence within the LCs: employment within the LCs, representation (women as members of the LCs), and communities' acceptance of women's presence in LCs.

The report also presented LDSPS' view on some of the successes achieved with regard to women's presence within LCs, and the factors that affected directly or indirectly the increase of this participation and presence, i.e. the nature of local communities, LCs' formation mechanisms and the individual experiences of women; even though a large number of these mechanisms and dynamics could not be measured over a longer-term, since experiences in Eastern Ghouta, Western Aleppo Countryside and some areas in Idlib were aborted after the regime regained control over a part of these regions, and HTS controlled the other **(LDSPS's work with LCs continues only in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside).**

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In conclusion, one can say that working with an integrated approach at various levels, and raising the awareness of communities, are some of the most important actions proven to be successful in increasing the presence of women in local governance structures. **It is not possible to work on this subject in an effective and sustainable manner without involving the local communities.**

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