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'IF WE DON'T WORK, WE DON'T EAT'

Syrian Women Face Mounting Food Insecurity
a Decade into the Conflict

February 2021



care

75 YEARS



Executive Summary

Ten years ago, the lives of many Syrians changed profoundly as violence erupted between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and armed resistance forces. The resulting humanitarian crisis is one of the worst of our time – 6.7 million Syrians remain internally displaced; 11 million people are in need¹ and 12.4 million live with food insecurity.²

In recent months, the situation has deteriorated even further as the COVID-19 pandemic, mass displacements, natural disaster, economic collapse and ongoing hostilities have combined to create a situation wherein households are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs, including for food.

Average food prices in Syria increased by 236% in 2020 – and food prices are more than 29 times higher than the five-year pre-crisis average, causing many families to resort to negative coping strategies. This includes eating fewer and/or smaller meals to get by.³

Furthermore, due to the loss or reduced capacity of male heads of household to death, injury, disappearance or emigration in search of work, many Syrian women are now the sole or primary breadwinners for their families, bearing the full burden of providing for their families with limited livelihood opportunities. About 22% of Syrian households are now headed by women; this is up from only 4% prior to the conflict.⁴ Even in households where the male head of household is working in some capacity, dire economic circumstances have pushed women to find some source of income to help with household expenses. **In both cases, women are thrust into the ‘provider’ role in a way that most had not previously experienced.⁵**

¹ UNICEF (February 2021). ‘Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report, End of Year 2020.’ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Whole%20of%20Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20-%20End-of-year%202020.pdf>

² Arab News (13 February 2021). ‘12.4 m people food insecure in war-torn Syria: WFP.’ <https://arab.news/mwjvh>

³ World Food Programme (WFP) (December 2020). ‘Syria Situation Report #12.’ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-12-december-2020>

⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (November 2020). ‘Regional Situation Report for the Syria Crisis, #99.’ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA_Regional_Situation_Report_for_the_Syria_Crisis_-_November_2020_-_FA.pdf

⁵ CARE International (February 2020). ‘Supporting Resilience in Syria – Women’s Experience of the Conflict and the “New Normal”.’ https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE-Policy-Brief_Supporting-resilience-in-Syria_Feb-2020.pdf

KEY FINDINGS

Interviews with 48 women living as internally displaced persons (IDPs), residents, hosts and returnees in camps and villages in Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor governorates in north-east Syria and Aleppo and Idlib governorates in the north west, provided valuable insights into some of the challenges facing Syrian women today. Some of the key findings from this research include:

- **Across the board, women reflected on the stark contrast between their lives before the crisis and today.** Many residents, returnees, IDPs and hosts alike reported feelings of instability, fear of recurring violence and/or displacement, and concerns about being able to meet their families' basic needs.
- **Many women interviewed had taken on the role of sole or primary breadwinner for their households, and for most, this was a role that they had not performed prior to the crisis.** Women reported having to take on the provider role due to a lack of job opportunities for men; death, loss or incapacity of a male head of household; rising costs of living; and low wages. In addition to providing for their households, most of the women interviewed were also shouldering caregiving responsibilities for children, parents, disabled spouses or other family members.
- **Many young women also reported having to find work to contribute to their household's expenses.** Some articulated a shift in social norms and expectations that supported young women's work, rather than relegating them to marriage and other traditional roles. While some young women were attending school, many reported having their studies interrupted due to displacement and/or insecurity, while others had to stop school in order to work.
- **Most women and youth who worked had taken on daily or seasonal jobs, such as crop harvesting; others were carrying out familiar jobs such as sewing, cooking and cleaning for other households.** A few relied on livestock assets for income. Nearly all expressed the desire for a more stable income, but identified lack of training, education, certification and resources as barriers to securing reliable employment.
- **The effects of COVID-19 upon livelihoods varied regionally, due to differences in the extent of pandemic-related restrictions and lockdown measures.** In the north east, where measures to restrict the spread of the disease were more strict, women reported direct negative economic effects due to work interruptions and their inability to access markets to sell products. Indirect negative effects were also reported, as travel bans and market disruptions had driven up the price of goods. Women in the north west were more neutral on their views of the economic impact of COVID-19. For many, the pandemic had not interrupted work, as it was already unstable and unreliable. For a few women, the pandemic created temporary job opportunities in the production of masks.
- **Overwhelmingly, the women interviewed identified food insecurity as an urgent, pressing issue for their households.** Citing the rapidly increasing costs of food and other goods, the vast majority reported using at least one coping strategy to offset food insecurity. The most commonly reported coping strategies were borrowing food or money, skipping meals, relying on less nutritious staple foods, and reducing other household expenses to allocate money towards food.
- **Poor food quality and nutrition were major concerns, particularly for pregnant and lactating women (PLW) and mothers with young children.** Noting a drastic reduction in the variety of available and accessible foods over time, women often expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality and diversity of their households' diets. Due to both the high price and limited availability of some foods such as meat, fruit and vegetables, many households are reliant on staples such as bulgur, lentils, rice and potatoes, supplementing with cheap, lower-quality vegetables when available. Some women linked anaemia among their household members to poor diet; likewise, a few mothers attributed their children's poor health or growth faltering due to poor diet.

- **Women’s attitudes about the future were mixed with optimism, pessimism and uncertainty.** However, most conveyed a belief that the direction their lives would take hinged upon whether or not they were able to work and provide for their families.

CREATING LASTING CHANGE FOR SYRIAN WOMEN

Over the past 75 years, the CARE package has transformed from a physical box containing food parcels for World War II survivors in Europe to its current form as a range of programmes focused on long-term solutions to poverty, through empowering women and girls. For instance, a modern CARE package could include cash and voucher assistance to help refugees purchase food and household essentials; CARE’s Village Savings and Loans Associations that allow women to harness the power of group savings; Farmer Field and Business Schools that enable women smallholder farmers to gain and share knowledge on nutrition-sensitive agricultural methods; or a Social Analysis and Action process that guides communities through exercises to identify and challenge harmful gender norms and create more equitable ones.

The CARE package has evolved to deliver long-lasting, transformative change – the kind of change that Syrian women and their families need right now. Over the past decade of the conflict, humanitarian response has largely centred on short-term, immediate relief. However, in light of persisting crises and rapidly deteriorating circumstances, it has become clear that donors and the humanitarian community could create larger-scale, more sustainable impacts by shifting their approach to support Syrian women’s self-sufficiency, growth and security. This could be by:

1. **Funding rapid, large-scale investments in livelihoods support** to foster sustainable livelihoods and independence for Syrian households, to lessen aid dependency.
2. **Directing funds specifically to support women in accessing livelihoods**, through gender-responsive interventions that address vulnerabilities, while harnessing their own capacities.
3. **Scaling up humanitarian interventions to reduce micronutrient, nutrition and food consumption gaps** and reduce reliance on negative, unsustainable coping mechanisms, especially among young women, pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under five years of age.
4. **Promoting nutrition-sensitive food production and processing activities and value chains** to maximise the nutritional impact of food security and livelihoods activities.
5. **Establishing secondary support systems**, including childcare, transportation and health care, to relieve some of the burden of women taking on dual roles of caregiver and provider.
6. **Negotiating and/or resolving bureaucratic barriers and misperceptions** that prevent procurement of goods from local producers, so that aid funds can strengthen local value chains, including for cereal, dairy and livestock.
7. **Prioritising early disbursement of UN-managed funds** – particularly for livelihoods projects and food security initiatives – for quick disbursement to implementing partners, and the pre-positioning of goods, in order to ensure the continuity of aid.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2011, violence erupted in Syria as protests against the regime escalated, culminating in calls for President Bashar al-Assad to step down. By July 2012, civil war had erupted between the regime and armed resistance groups, creating a humanitarian crisis marked by mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, separation of families and food insecurity. At the end of 2020, 6.7 million Syrians remained internally displaced and an estimated 11 million people were in need.⁶ Furthermore, the number of food-insecure Syrians has nearly doubled from 6.3 million in 2015⁷ to 12.4 million today⁸ and, based on dietary diversity and meal frequency, 54.9% of Syrians have insufficient food consumption.⁹

Almost 40% of internally displaced families have been displaced more than three times.¹⁰

Since late 2019, Syria has witnessed multiple shocks, including extensive military operations in the north-eastern region of the country; mass displacements due to escalating hostilities in the north west; flooding in refugee camps; and an economic crisis complicated by international trade sanctions, the devaluing Syrian pound, and a dramatic increase in the price of commodities. For example, the price of staple foods such as rice and wheat flour has increased by about 240% since December 2019.¹¹ Similarly, the price of diesel fuel has increased by 117% since June 2020.¹²



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From December 2019 to March 2020, nearly 1 million people were displaced in north-west Syria, the largest wave of displacement to date in the crisis. Women and children made up 80% of those displaced.¹³ This was in addition to the 2.7 million people who were already displaced.¹⁴

Much of Syria's critical infrastructure – such as schools, housing, water systems and health facilities – has yet to be restored and more than 80% of the population lives below the poverty line.¹⁵ This vulnerability is only compounded by the rising costs of food and goods. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), average food prices in Syria increased by 236% in 2020. Food prices are now more than 29 times higher than the five-year pre-crisis average,¹⁶ leaving many families struggling to cope with hunger and food insecurity on a daily basis.

The situation is especially critical for Syrian women. Already living in a constant state of insecurity and uncertainty, many have now taken on the responsibility of providing for their families in the absence or incapacity of male heads of household. **However, history shows that such circumstances don't have to end**

⁶ UNICEF (February 2021). 'Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report, End of Year 2020.'

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Whole%20of%20Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20-%20End-of-year%202020.pdf>

⁷ WFP (October 2015). 'Food Security Assessment Report, Syria.'

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Food%20Security%20Assessment%20Report%202015.pdf>

⁸ Arab News (13 February 2021). '12.4 m people food insecure in war-torn Syria: WFP.' <https://arab.news/mwjvh>

⁹ WFP (5 February 2021). 'HungerMap LIVE: Hunger and COVID-19 Weekly Snapshot, Syrian Arab Republic.'

<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000123610/download/>

¹⁰ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) (December 2020) 'Humanitarian Response Plan, Syrian Arab Republic.'

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020_syria_humanitarian_response_plan.pdf

¹¹ WFP (December 2020). 'Syria Country Office, Market Price Watch Bulletin, Issue 73.'

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000122982.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Food Security Cluster (December 2020). 'Northwest Syria, Newly Displaced IDPs.'

https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/newly_displaced_idps_assessment_nws_23122020.pdf

¹⁴ UNICEF (February 2021). 'Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report, End of Year 2020.'

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Whole%20of%20Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20-%20End-of-year%202020.pdf>

¹⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross (June 2020). 'Syria: Economic crisis compounds conflict misery as millions face deeper poverty, hunger.'

<https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1920/syria-economic-crisis-compounds-conflict-misery-as-millions-face-deeper-poverty-hunger>

¹⁶ WFP (December 2020). 'Syria Situation Report #12.' <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-12-december-2020>

in catastrophe. In fact, women’s work can stabilise economies, protect their households from economic shocks and stresses, and lay the foundation for a shift towards more equitable gender norms.

For example, while men were fighting overseas during World War II, many American women – who had not traditionally worked outside of the home – had to take up ‘men’s work’ to keep the economy afloat and produce the goods and materials needed to support the war effort. An estimated 6.7 million women entered the workforce, an increase of almost 50%.¹⁷ While the direct effects of women entering the labour force during World War II are arguable – as many women exited the workforce immediately after the war – there were lasting, indirect consequences. Women’s ability to work outside the home and provide for their families and communities had been established. This contributed to a gradual shift in women’s expectations for themselves, as well as gender and social norms that would influence the shape of the American workforce and fuel women’s and civil rights movements for years to come.¹⁸

Now entering the tenth year of the conflict, many Syrian households are facing the worst conditions they’ve experienced since the conflict began, as continuing shocks and stresses such as repeated displacement, increased conflict events and loss of livelihoods threaten to deplete household resilience. Women are under increasing pressure to effectively ensure the survival of their households. While short-term, immediate assistance is necessary to respond to escalating hostilities and new emergencies, persistent and cyclical crises and rapidly deteriorating circumstances indicate that relying solely on this approach is inadequate and can create aid dependence. A dual approach, which includes a shift towards sustainable, large-scale change, is required to support self-sufficiency, growth and security among Syrian women and their families.

THE RESEARCH

This research sought to better understand Syrian women’s experiences during the past decade, with a focus on how their lives have changed, the livelihoods strategies they have employed, and their experiences with food insecurity. To this end, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with 48 women living in camps and villages in Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor governorates in north-east Syria (NES) and Aleppo and Idlib governorates in the north west (NWS). Participants and study sites were selected in order to capture the spectrum of women’s experiences as internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees, residents¹⁹ or hosts in crisis-affected communities. Participants selected for interview equally represented female heads of household (FHH); youth aged 14-25 years; and pregnant and lactating women (PLW)/mothers of children under five years of age. Women with disabilities were also included in the sample. These groups were selected for their unique perspectives on the dynamics and effects of the crisis over time, as well as their heightened vulnerability to food insecurity. Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity due to systemic gender inequalities that impede their ability to produce, access, afford and consume food.²⁰



As such, globally:

- **60% of people experiencing chronic hunger are women and girls;**²¹

¹⁷ Rose, E. (2018). ‘The Rise and Fall of Female Labor Force Participation During World War II in the United States.’ *The Journal of Economic History*, 78(3), 673–711. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050718000323>

¹⁸ McEuen, M. (9 June 2016). Women, Gender, and World War II. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.55>

¹⁹ A ‘resident’ refers to a person who was not displaced from their current residence. A ‘returnee’ refers to a person who was temporarily displaced from their original home or community but has since returned.

²⁰ CARE International (August 2020). ‘Left Out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women Will Prevent Us From Solving the Hunger Crisis.’ https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Left-Out-and-Left-Behind-report_Aug-2020.pdf

²¹ UN Women (2012). ‘Facts and Figures, Commission on the Status of Women.’ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures>

- women are more likely to experience moderate or severe food insecurity than men;²² and
- female-headed households are at highest risk of experiencing food crises.²³

Interviews were conducted by CARE field staff over the course of three weeks, from December 2020 to January 2021. Although the findings of this study cannot be considered representative of all Syrian women, they may help guide programmes that respond to the livelihood and food security needs of some of the most vulnerable people, while at the same time seeking to decrease aid dependency.

WOMEN'S CHANGING LIVES AND EVOLVING ROLES

The lives of many women in Syria today are profoundly different from their lives ten years ago. Prior to the onset of the conflict, Syrian women were largely relegated to traditional roles, such as caregiving and household chores. Some women worked at home, supporting their families' agriculture or livestock activities. Fewer were employed in the formal labour market; prior to the conflict only about 22% of women were in the labour force compared to 80% of men.²⁴ However, due to the loss or reduced capacity of many male heads of household to death, injury, disappearance or emigration in search of work, many Syrian women in crisis-affected areas are now the sole or primary breadwinners for their families.

Approximately 22% of Syrian households are now headed by women, a substantial increase from only 4% prior to the conflict.²⁵ Even in families where the male head of household is working in some capacity, soaring food prices, low wages and a shortage of work opportunities for men have pushed women to find some source of income to help with household expenses. As a result, many women have been thrust into the 'provider' role in a way that most had not previously experienced.

'I was a housewife who was only responsible for raising my children and taking care of my household. Now, my role has changed a lot and I am responsible for four children and all of them have a visual impairment. I am now the mother and father to them, and I am now working on developing myself and undergoing several trainings in computer, community health and data collection in order to get a good job opportunity and a stable income for my family.' (FHH, 28, IDP, Aleppo)

'My role is essential... previously, my husband was the one who worked, but he lost his job and I have to work. The women here in this camp must do whatever work is available to her to live, which is often seasonal agricultural work. In the past, it was not necessary for women to work because most of the men of our village own land that they cultivate, so women took care of the household, children and husband.' (Mother of young children, 23, IDP, Idlib)

This shift in dynamics is especially abrupt and burdensome in female-headed households, where widows and otherwise single women bear the full weight of providing for their families.

'My role in the past was limited to doing housework and raising children because my husband refused my work, even within the home, as he considered the responsibility of the woman is to raise children and take care of her household affairs. Now, my role has changed a lot after my husband's death and after returning from displacement. Now I work as a seamstress to provide an income for my family, as well as doing some maintenance work for household appliances, in addition to caring for children and helping them with their lessons.' (FHH, 33, returnee, Aleppo)

²² Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNICEF, WFP and World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns.' <https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/foodsecurity/state-food-security-nutrition-2019-en.pdf?ua=1>

²³ CARE (April 2020). 'COVID-19, Food & Nutrition Security, and Gender Equality.' https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/covid_food_security_and_gender_equality.pdf

²⁴ World Economic Forum (2009). 'Global Gender Gap Report 2009.' http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2009.pdf

²⁵ UNFPA (November 2020). 'Regional Situation Report for the Syria Crisis, #99.' https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA_Regional_Situation_Report_for_the_Syria_Crisis_-_November_2020_-_FA.pdf

Similarly, some female youth who would previously have been expected to take on traditional roles in the household or get married, are seeing a shift in expectations from their families, such that they are allowed and expected to work to contribute to their households.

‘Previously, my role was limited to doing housework and not allowing us to complete our education or go outside the home and work. But now my family has begun to accept the idea of working for girls, and when I find an opportunity, even if it is temporary, I go out to work and share the [household] expenses with my brother.’ (Youth, 20, returnee, Aleppo)

It is important to acknowledge that in most cases, women are still expected to maintain their caregiving and household work, as well as their income-generating work. In other words, **their new responsibility as provider is in addition to – not in place of – their traditional role.** Maintaining these dual roles can put incredible stress and pressure on women.

‘A woman must find a job that is proper for her and doesn’t affect her performance as wife and mother. Despite the evolution in society, there is still a negative perception of a woman who is working and doesn’t take care of her family and her children.’ (PLW, 32, host, Al-Hasakah)

‘I take care of my sick and elderly mother, in addition to my responsibility to raise sheep and take care of them, as they are my source of livelihood, do household work, secure food and prepare it. One of my daily fears is the inability to provide bread, diesel, some foodstuffs and, most importantly, medicine, due to the lack of money sometimes.’ (FHH, 44, host, Al-Hasakah)

These shifting dynamics and newfound reliance on women to economically support their households necessitate increased livelihoods support and capacity building for women.

The benefits of economically empowering women extend far beyond financial well-being. Women who are economically empowered are also more likely to be empowered in their households and communities, and more able to participate in decision-making. This reduces women’s risk of exploitation, marginalisation and vulnerability, and leads to long-term changes in social norms and economic structures that benefit entire communities.²⁶

‘Being financially independent has influenced my participation in decision-making; I predict if I will stop working, there may be some opinion differences between my husband and me. According to our social traditions and norms “the man is [the] controlling factor in decision-making in case the wife is not a worker and doesn’t participate in the income” and my husband may impose his opinion over mine.’ (PLW, 32, host, Al-Hasakah)

LIMITED LIVELIHOODS STRATEGIES

As most women have not previously worked outside of the home in Syria, they have yet to build the skills required to participate in reasonably profitable, reliable livelihoods activities. Instead, they take on familiar, less lucrative jobs such as sewing, cooking and cleaning. Others work at daily and/or seasonal agriculture jobs like harvesting olives, cumin or other crops; still others rely on livestock assets to make a living. In most cases, the income generated from women’s labour is not sufficient to meet the needs of their households.

The median cost of the survival minimum expenditure basket (SMEB)²⁷ ranges from 254,111 Syrian pounds (SYP) (USD 92) in northeast Syria to SYP 282,716 (USD 105) in the northwest. On average,

²⁶ CARE International (2016). ‘CARE 2020 Program Strategy: Women’s Economic Empowerment.’ <https://www.care-international.org/files/files/programme%20summary/Summary-Women's%20Economic%20Empowerment.pdf>

²⁷ The ‘survival minimum expenditure basket’ refers to a culturally adjusted basket of food, hygiene, fuel and other items required to support the minimum needs of a household of six for a month.

this is 2.5 times higher than the median SMEB costs in January 2020.^{28, 29}

For women who are uneducated and/or illiterate, work opportunities are even more limited, and many are forced to rely solely on humanitarian aid to meet their families' needs. Even for those who are able to find steady work with a fixed income, the country's crumbling economy and increased cost of living have rendered their salaries insufficient.

'I am working as teacher with the government, in addition to daily working with CARE as a trainer. My fixed main income is less than 17.5 USD per month, so it is not sufficient to cover the main requirements for the family, especially with the situation of high prices.' (PLW, 32, host, Al-Hasakah)

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a deleterious impact at the macroeconomic level in Syria, women report mixed effects on household economics. For some women, the pandemic created temporary job opportunities in the production of masks. In the north east, pandemic-related curfews and lockdown measures disrupted transportation, market access and work more so than in the north west.³⁰ As such, more women in the north east described COVID-19 as having had negative economic impacts on their households.

'Corona had a great impact on my husband's work because of the ban, so he could no longer go to work, which led to a reduction in his working days, and consequently a decrease in our income because he works on a daily basis. This had a great effect on us, especially due to the raising prices and the huge changes in food prices.' (Mother of young children, 20, IDP, Al-Hasakah)

'Livestock is my main source of my income. I sell dairy and sometimes I sell and buy some sheep for trade and interest. The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on my work and income, because the car that transported the dairy was no longer able to move between regions much due to curfew. Also, due to the lack of job opportunities during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, people started buying basic food such as bread, rice, bulgur, tea and sugar, so milk and its derivatives and lamb meat became secondary matters, and thus the amount of purchase decreased and this affected my income negatively.' (FHH, 26, resident, Al-Hasakah)

Some women who have the benefit of stable employment and a steady income still feel the indirect effects of the pandemic on their household finances, through its effect on the price of goods.

'I am currently employed as an English language teacher in the school and I have a fixed monthly salary that I get from the Syrian government every month, but it is very small compared to the foreign exchange with the USD on which the prices of different products depend. COVID-19 disease did not affect my work, as my salary is fixed if I go to work or not, but the effect was in the high prices in the market as a result of the ban and quarantine, which makes our salary absolutely worthless over time.' (FHH, 47, resident, Al-Hasakah)

Interviewees in the north west were less likely to identify COVID-related economic shocks. For some, the pandemic did not do much to diminish already-scant work opportunities; others were compelled to shoulder the risks of working during the pandemic to keep their households afloat.

²⁸ REACH (January 2021). 'Northeast Syria Market Monitoring Exercise, December 2020.' https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SYR_Northeast_Situation-Overview_Market-Monitoring_December_2020.pdf

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ REACH (November 2020). 'Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria, Northeast Syria.' https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SYR_HSOS-factsheet_November-2020_NES.pdf

'Corona did not affect my family's income. I work as a daily worker and people here think about securing a livelihood without concern for sickness or even death.' **(Mother of young children, 23, IDP, Idlib)**

SEEKING STABILITY

Citing the unreliable nature of daily and seasonal work, women stated that they desired more stable employment; however, lack of education, training and certification are the most commonly identified barriers to reliable work.

'I work with my mother and sister – we work as seasonal agricultural workers. I do not have any fixed income. I would like to be employed, but I am not educated and I do not have any certificate that entitles me to any job. But I hope to learn a profession and open a small business for me and my mother.' **(Youth, 20, IDP, Idlib)**

'My main source of income is from raising livestock and selling livestock products such as milk, wool and yoghurt, and sometimes I sell sheep or lambs and I earn that money. I would like to work so that I have a monthly salary through which I can secure a living and do not need anyone. I have tried more than once to search for work, but I faced some obstacles that prevented me from getting a job, including not having a university degree or even a high school diploma.' **(FHH, 44, host, Al-Hasakah)**

Some women also struggle to find work and lack a support system that would help them balance their caregiving responsibilities.

'I work in selling children's clothes and some women's supplies and clothes in the camp, therefore there is no fixed income for us to rely on in our daily life. I definitely want to be employed, so I have a stable source of income. But caring for my disabled husband is my responsibility, I certainly cannot work outside the home for a long time or stay away from my husband, so this is the first reason that prevented me from working outside the camp. The other reason is that I am not educated, and I do not have any educational certificates or experience certificates, so there is no suitable job I can do with my skills and thus this also restricts me.' **(FHH, 45, IDP, Al-Hasakah)**

Economic stress and poverty have implications for women and girls beyond the inability to buy food and other goods. Women and girls in poor and crisis-affected households are also at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation; the risk is even higher for female heads of households.³¹ Lack of resources to meet their family's basic needs may lead some women to resort to survival sex or make them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Additionally, male unemployment, combined with shifting gender roles, social norms accepting of GBV and years of crisis-induced stress, may lower the threshold at which men commit violence against women and girls.³² Furthermore, women and girls who are forced to travel outside of their communities to find work or to aid distribution sites are also at increased risk of violence. Indeed, many women interviewed said they would advise other women not to travel far and not to travel after dark due to safety concerns.

'I would advise her to stay in the camp because it is safe and there is no robbery, kidnapping or anything, but I do not advise her to go out far from the camp, especially if she does not go out with her husband or brothers, especially at night.' **(Youth, 20, IDP, Idlib)**

³¹ UNFPA (May 2019). 'Whole of Syria Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility: Voices from Syria 2019.' https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/voices_from_syria_2019.pdf

³² CARE International Turkey (February 2020). 'Rapid Gender Analysis North West Syria (Idlib and Aleppo).' <http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-Report-North-West-Syria-CARE-Turkey.pdf>

Furthermore, without sufficient resources, families are unable to ensure safe and adequate shelter or access to critical needs such as health services and education; this can diminish a household’s ability to cope with other shocks and stresses.

A NEW CHALLENGE

Food prices in Syria are the highest recorded since WFP began tracking in 2013.³³ Prior to the conflict, the five year (2006–2010) national average price of the WFP reference food basket was SYP 3,700; today’s food basket costs SYP 111,676.^{34,36} The price of staple food and items such as rice and oil has increased by over 200% in just the last year and households are no longer able to afford other food items like meat and fruit.^{37,38}

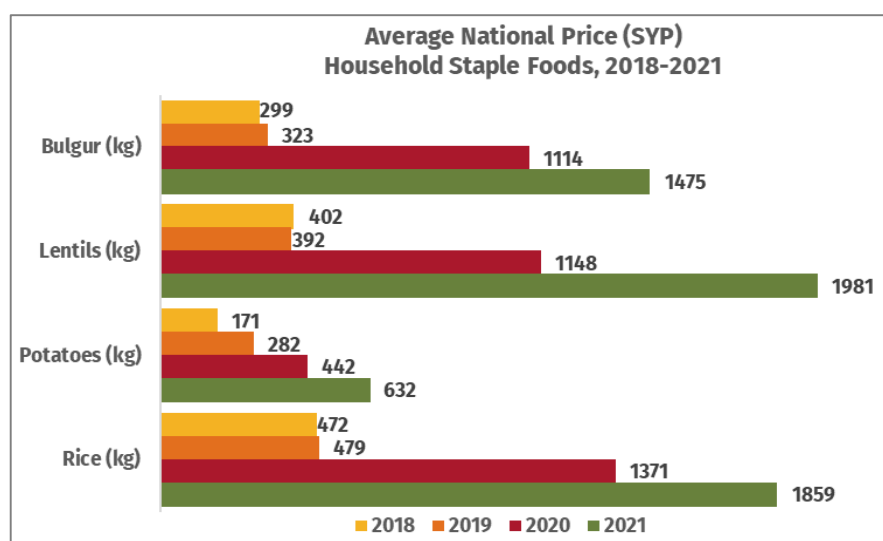


Figure 1. Average national price of select staple items, 2018–2021 (SYP)³⁸

Rising food costs, coinciding with the economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic, have combined to create a rapidly deteriorating food security situation for many Syrian households. Currently, 12.4 million people in Syria are facing food insecurity,³⁹ with an additional 2.2 million at risk of food insecurity.⁴⁰ Lack of resources, increasing food prices, and disruptions to supply chains and markets due to COVID-19 have created a situation where most households find it virtually impossible to obtain the amount and types of food required to meet the nutritional needs of all members.

³³ WFP (December 2020). ‘Syria Situation Report #12.’ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-12-december-2020>

³⁴ The reference food basket is a group of essential food commodities tailored to the local context and designed to meet the nutritional requirements of the average family in a given country. In Syria, the food basket comprises a set of dry goods that provides 2,060 kcal a day for a family of six for a month. The basket includes 37 kilograms (kg) of bread, 19 kg of rice, 19 kg of lentils, 5 kg of sugar and 7 litres of vegetable oil. WFP (December 2020). ‘Syria Country Office Market Price Watch Bulletin, Issue 73.’ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000122982.pdf>

³⁵ WFP (June 2018). ‘Syria Market Assessment Part I: Lattakia, Tartous, and Homs.’ <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000108309/download/>

³⁶ WFP (December 2020). ‘Syria Country Office Market Price Watch Bulletin, Issue 73.’ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000122982.pdf>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Food price data are collected from multiple markets across governorates and updated weekly by WFP VAM (Vulnerability and Mapping). For these calculations, monthly price data for the select items were averaged for each year. Data can be accessed at: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/wfp-food-prices-for-syrian-arab-republic>. Data referenced for this study were last updated 14 February 2021.

³⁹ Arab News (13 February 2021). ‘12.4 m people food insecure in war-torn Syria: WFP.’ <https://arab.news/mwjvh>

⁴⁰ WFP (December 2020). ‘Syria Situation Report #12.’ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-12-december-2020>

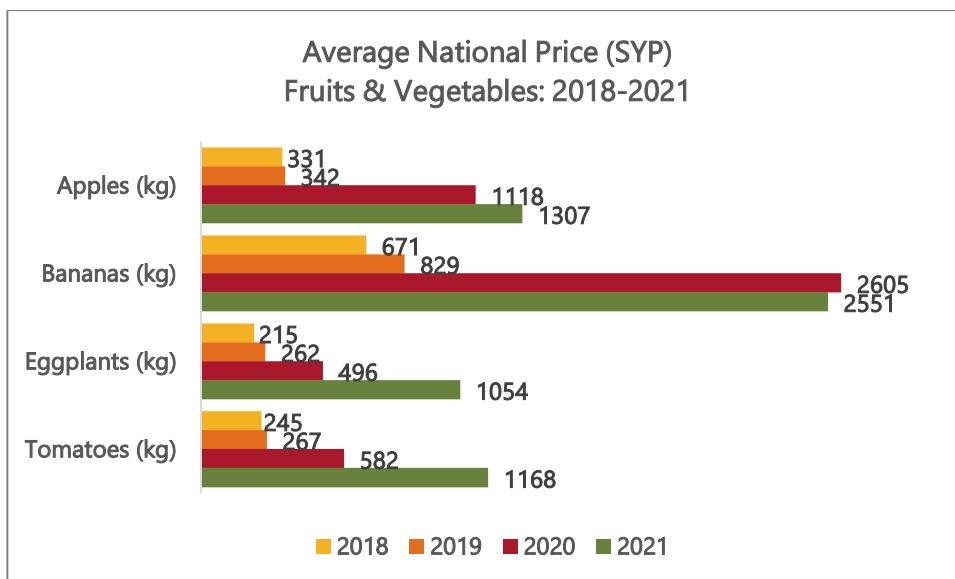


Figure 2. Average national price of selected fruits and vegetables, 2018–2021 (SYP)³⁸

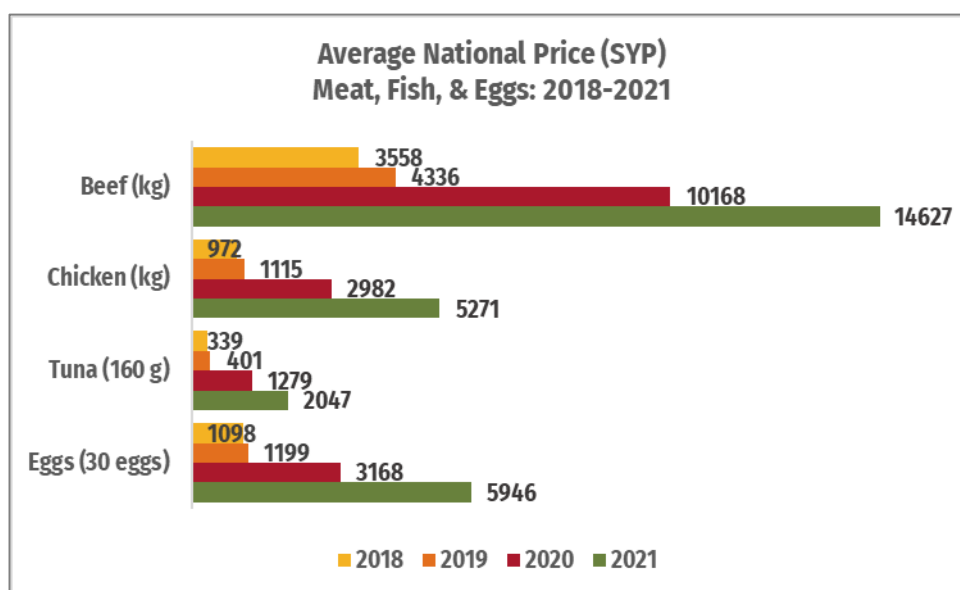


Figure 3. Average national price of selected food, fish and egg items, 2018–2021 (SYP)³⁸

In the face of food insecurity, many households resort to coping strategies, such as:

- reducing the variety of foods purchased;
- skipping meals;
- reducing portion sizes;
- purchasing cheaper, lower-quality foods;
- borrowing food or money;
- selling household assets; and/or
- reducing other household expenses (e.g., medicine, education fees, clothing, appliances, mobile phones, etc.)

⁴¹ Food price data are collected from multiple markets across governorates and updated by WFP VAM. For these calculations, monthly price data for the select items were averaged for each year. Data can be accessed at: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/wfp-food-prices-for-syrian-arab-republic>. Data referenced for this study were last updated 14 February 2021 and include food price information for January 2021.

According to recent data from WFP, 47.2% of Syrian households are employing more frequent and/or extreme negative food-based coping strategies, such as relying on less expensive food, limiting portion sizes and skipping meals.⁴²

‘We suffer from difficult periods, so we have to reduce the amount of food: we cook one dish daily or give priority to children to eat before adults. The most cooked meal is pasta, although most of us don't like it, but it's cheaper than other foods. The increasing prices have changed the situation completely.’ (Youth, 20, resident, Al-Hasakah)

‘All expenses, including food and clothing, have been reduced. A large part of the household furniture was sold to secure the cost of the food. Dietary diversity has been greatly reduced, and the number of meals has become two meals a day. Until last year, prices were much lower than now.’ (FHH, 28, IDP, Aleppo)

Some households, especially the most vulnerable, may rely primarily on food aid.

‘We depend mainly on food aids and aids from organisations. We don't buy food materials a lot. If there is only bread in my house, I will not borrow money because I cannot pay the debts later. Most of the time we eat one dish and very rarely I cook two dishes. Children are not satisfied with this food in terms of the variety. We tend to cook cereals, especially rice.’ (FHH, 34, resident, Deir ez-Zor)

While economic coping strategies, such as selling household assets and borrowing money, can drive households deeper into poverty, coping strategies around consumption patterns – for example, reducing dietary diversity and skipping meals – can result in negative health and nutrition outcomes. Women and girls often bear the greatest burden in terms of harmful coping strategies. They are more likely than their male counterparts to limit how much and how often they eat in times of scarcity and are more vulnerable to high-risk coping strategies, such as early marriage for girls or transactional sex for money.⁴³ Pregnant and lactating women, youth and children are particularly vulnerable to the physiological consequences of food insecurity and malnutrition.

‘My children are growing tolerably but my little boy is malnourished. One of the organisations came to the camp and measured him, and they told me that he was malnourished and had a developmental delay. They prescribed him milk and some vitamins, but I don't have the money to buy them.’ (Mother of young children, 24, IDP, Idlib)

‘We do not feel healthy and energy and are not very satisfied with the quality and quantity of food. Most of the family members suffer from anaemia due to lack of food.’ (Youth, 19, returnee, Aleppo)

In Syria, one out of eight children are stunted⁴⁴ and one out of every three PLW is anaemic.⁴⁵

Yet, while negative coping strategies are common, some women have found other ways to mitigate food insecurity, including bartering or preparing for food shortages.

⁴² WFP (5 February 2021). ‘HungerMap LIVE: Hunger and COVID-19 Weekly Snapshot, Syrian Arab Republic.’ <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000123610/download/>

⁴³ CARE International (August 2020). ‘Left Out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women Will Prevent Us From Solving the Hunger Crisis.’ https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Left-Out-and-Left-Behind-report_Aug-2020.pdf

⁴⁴ Save the Children (2020). ‘Hidden Hunger, A look at malnutrition across Syria, with a focus on under-twos.’ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18284/pdf/hidden_hunger_in_syria-cc-2020.pdf

⁴⁵ UNOCHA (December 2020). ‘Humanitarian Response Plan, Syrian Arab Republic.’ https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020_syria_humanitarian_response_plan.pdf

'During the summer, we store vegetables that are cheap in order to consume them in winter, when they are expensive.' (Youth, 16, IDP, Idlib)

'I get some food through bartering. I give dairy to the store owner and in return, he gives me the basic materials such as bread, vegetables, rice, oil and tea.' (FHH, 26, resident, Al-Hasakah)

The women interviewed for this research often reflected on the stark contrast between the current quality and diversity of foods versus food in recent and pre-crisis years.

'Ten years ago, our food was nutritious. We ate meat, fish, vegetables of all kinds and fruits of all kinds. Today, I have not eaten fruit for about two years. I would like to buy meat, because I forgot its taste for not eating it for a long time. I also wish to buy oranges, apples and all kinds of fruits.' (Youth, 20, IDP, Idlib)

'Because our income is limited, our food is not varied and in a small quantity, so most of our food is rice. My children tell me that they want to eat chicken and vegetables and they are not satisfied with this food, so I tell them that when the money is available, I will bring them whatever they want. Before the crisis, the situation was better than now; there was a variety of food and we did not decrease the quantity and number of meals. But during the crisis, circumstances changed. I want to buy fruits and chicken, but high prices and not having enough money prevents me from buying them.' (Mother of young children, 35, host, Al-Hasakah)

'Dietary diversity has been greatly reduced, and the number of meals has become two meals a day. Until last year, prices were much lower than now and food diversification was more. Currently, we rely on legumes and cannot afford meat or fruits.' (FHH, 28, IDP, Aleppo)

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, women have experienced ongoing threats to their health, safety and security. Now, rising food insecurity, the pandemic and an economic crisis have thrown even more women into the role of provider, adding to the already-immense stress and uncertainty they face day-to-day. Despite the challenges they face, some women express optimism about the future, while others find it hard to hold onto hope.

However, **the vast majority of women interviewed believed that the future well-being of their families depended on whether or not they were able to work and obtain sustainable income.**

'I am now a widow and I have a concern that someone may take my children from me or I will be force-married to someone that I don't love. I have lost a lot of wishes and hopes, but now I hope to find a job through which I can secure some money for the future of my children. And I have a hope to return to our home and rebuild our house and stay there for our whole life. I wish I could see those days and be able to achieve what I want.' (FHH, 22, IDP, Al-Hasakah)

'I hope it will be better, but if work is not available, the situation will be much worse because of the high price of everything and the lack of suitable job opportunities. I hope that we will return to our village and my children [will] learn, and I hope to meet my family.' (Mother of young children, 24, IDP, Idlib)

'I think the coming years will be better because I have plans to expand my projects and the wealth of livestock, especially after receiving help from CARE, which is quite good help. If

we have more sheep that means have more production of milk, thus increasing income and living a decent life.’ (PLW, 24, resident, Al-Hasakah)

These interviews provide a valuable insight into some of the common challenges facing Syrian women today, along with their own perspectives on what they need to overcome obstacles and ensure a better future for their families. Some of the key takeaways from this research include:

- **Across the board, women reflected on the glaring contrast between their lives before the crisis and today.** Many residents, returnees, IDPs and hosts alike reported feelings of instability, fear of recurring violence and/or displacement, and concerns about being able to meet their families’ basic needs.
- **Many women interviewed had taken on the role of sole or primary breadwinner for their households and, for most, this was a role that they had not performed prior to the crisis.** Women reported having to take on the provider role due to a lack of job opportunities for men; death, loss or incapacity of a male head of household; rising costs of living; and low wages. In addition to providing for their households, most of the women interviewed were also shouldering caregiving responsibilities for children, parents, disabled spouses or other family members.
- **Many young women also reported having to find work to contribute to their household’s expenses.** Some articulated a shift in social norms and expectations that supported young women’s work, rather than relegating them to marriage and other traditional roles. While some young women were attending school, many reported having their studies interrupted due to displacement and/or insecurity, while others had to stop school in order to work.
- **Most women and youth who worked had taken on daily or seasonal jobs, such as crop harvesting; others were carrying out familiar jobs such as sewing, cooking and cleaning for other households.** A few were relying on livestock assets for income. Nearly all expressed the desire for a more stable income, but identified lack of training, education, certification and resources as barriers to securing reliable employment.
- **The effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods varied regionally, due to differences in the extent of pandemic-related restrictions and lockdown measures.** In the north east, where curfews and movement restrictions were more common, livelihoods had been negatively impacted due to work interruptions and their inability to access markets to sell products; indirectly, these measures had driven up the price of goods. Women in the north west were more neutral on their views of the economic impact of COVID-19. For many, the pandemic had not interrupted work, as it was already unstable and unreliable. For a few women, the pandemic created temporary job opportunities in the production of masks.
- **Overwhelmingly, women identified food insecurity as an urgent, pressing issue for their households.** Citing the rapidly increasing costs of food and other goods, the vast majority reported using at least one coping strategy to offset food insecurity. The most commonly reported coping strategies were borrowing food or money, skipping meals, relying on less nutritious staple foods, and reducing other household expenses to allocate money towards food.
- **Poor food quality and nutrition were major concerns, particularly for PLW and mothers with young children.** Noting a drastic reduction in the variety of available and accessible foods over time, women often expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality and diversity of their households’ diets. Due to both the high price and limited availability of some foods such as meat, fruit and vegetables, many households were reliant on staples such as bulgur, lentils, rice and potatoes, supplementing with cheap, lower-quality vegetables when available. Some women linked anaemia among their household members to poor diet; likewise, a few mothers attributed their children’s poor health or growth faltering due to poor diet.
- **Women’s attitudes about the future were mixed with optimism, pessimism and uncertainty.**

However, most conveyed a belief that the direction their lives would take hinged upon whether or not they were able to work and provide for their families.

Ten years into this crisis, Syrian women continue to display tremendous strength and resilience. Though the role of breadwinner is new and unexpected for many, women have quickly adapted, are confident in their ability to lead and provide for their families, and are eager to do so. What they need now are support and resources to help them overcome the barriers to their personal and financial development and success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these critical insights from a diverse group of Syrian women, CARE proposes the following recommendations to donors, as well as humanitarian and development agencies:

1. **Fund rapid, large-scale investments in livelihoods support** to foster sustainable livelihoods and independence for Syrian households, to lessen aid dependency.
2. **Direct funds specifically to support women in accessing livelihoods** through gender-responsive interventions that address vulnerabilities, while harnessing their own capacities.
3. **Scale up humanitarian interventions to reduce micronutrient, nutrition and food consumption gaps** and reduce reliance on negative, unsustainable coping mechanisms, especially among young women, pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under five years of age.
4. **Promote nutrition-sensitive food production and processing activities and value chains**, to maximise the nutritional impact of food security and livelihoods activities.
5. **Establish secondary support systems**, including childcare, transportation and health care, to relieve some of the burden of women taking on dual roles of caregiver and provider.
6. **Negotiate and/or resolve bureaucratic barriers and misperceptions** that prevent procurement of goods from local producers, so that aid funds can strengthen local value chains, including for cereal, dairy and livestock.
7. **Prioritise early disbursement of UN-managed funds** – particularly for livelihoods projects and food security initiatives – for quick disbursement to implementing partners and the pre-positioning of goods, in order to ensure the continuity of aid.



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Photos:

- Cover** Mariam (name changed), mother of four children, works on a farm, where she earns the equivalent of 20 US cents per day. This is barely enough for her and her children to survive. CARE's support for widows, as part of the Syria Resilience Consortium, helped her to make a new start.
- p2.** Flooding at an IDP camp in north-west Syria, January 2021.
- p5.** A young boy walks through an IDP camp that houses about 350 families from villages and towns in Hama and Idlib.
- p6.** A woman is interviewed in Al-Hasakah governorate, January 2021.
- P8.** Amani spends her evenings after work helping her three children (10, 9 and 8) with their homework.

Founded in 1945, CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. CARE has more than seven decades of experience helping people prepare for disasters, providing lifesaving assistance when a crisis hits, and helping communities recover after the emergency has passed. CARE places special focus on women and children, who are often disproportionately affected by disasters. To learn more, visit www.care-international.org.