

POLICY BRIEF

WHAT DO WOMEN NEED IN FRONTLINE AREAS?

Jisr Al-Shughour as a Case Study



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Empowerment



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DISCLAIMER

Equity and Empowerment (EE) collected data based on a survey conducted in April Which included 583 women and five focused group discussions with 112 women.

The results were compared with the multi-sectoral needs assessment conducted by Action for Humanity in several sub-districts, including Jisr al-Shughour.

This assessment highlights the urgent need for comprehensive humanitarian interventions to address the compounded effects of conflict and natural disasters on the affected population.

These efforts highlighted the critical needs of women in the area. Additionally, EE started working in Jisr Al-Shughour with funding from the Netherlands Refugee Foundation enabling them to provide essential services and support.



" To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

Etty Hillesum

This poignant reflection by Etty Hillesum, a Dutch writer and diarist, underscores the relentless struggle for identity and autonomy that women face, especially in conflict zones. In these areas, the turbulence of war and violence exacerbates existing gender inequalities, making the fight for basic rights and safety even more arduous for women. They are often subjected to gender-based violence, denied essential healthcare, and marginalized economically and socially.

Jisr Al-Shughour, is one of the hard-to-reach areas, located in the Idlib Governorate of northwestern Syria, that has been a focal point of conflict and humanitarian crises over the past decade. The city has been significantly impacted by ongoing conflict, resulting in widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and a severe deterioration in living conditions. Recently, the earthquake that struck southern Turkey and northern Syria on February 6, 2023, exacerbated these issues, creating additional challenges for the already vulnerable population. However, a few local NGOs and

grassroots organizations are actively providing essential services such as food distribution, basic healthcare, and education. These groups often operate under challenging conditions, leveraging local knowledge and networks to reach the most vulnerable populations. In addition, humanitarian organizations face resource constraints, including funding and personnel shortages. Given the widespread needs across Syria, resources are often allocated to areas with higher visibility or where aid can be delivered more efficiently. Jisr Al-Shughour's challenges in visibility and access mean it often receives less attention.

This policy brief provides a comprehensive analysis of the general humanitarian situation in Jisr Al-Shughour, with a particular focus on the needs of women. It also offers actionable recommendations to address these challenges and improve the well-being of women in the area.

General Humanitarian Situation

Impact of Conflict and Natural Disasters

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, Jisr Al-Shughour has experienced significant violence and instability. Its strategic location near the Turkish border has made it a battleground for various factions, leading to frequent clashes and extensive destruction. The city's population, once thriving with agriculture and small-scale industries, has been decimated, with many residents forced to flee their homes to escape the violence. Equity and Empowerment (E&E) conducted a comprehensive needs assessment in Jisr Al-Shughour to identify the most pressing challenges and develop targeted interventions. The assessment revealed several critical needs. According to the assessment, the February 2023 earthquake compounded these challenges, causing widespread damage to buildings and infrastructure. According to the Office for Humanitarian Coordination in Syria (OCHA), the earthquake affected 8.8 million people across Syria, with northwestern Syria being particularly hard hit. In Jisr Al-Shughour, the earthquake led to the collapse of homes, schools, and healthcare facilities, further straining the limited resources available to the local



Displacement and Living Conditions

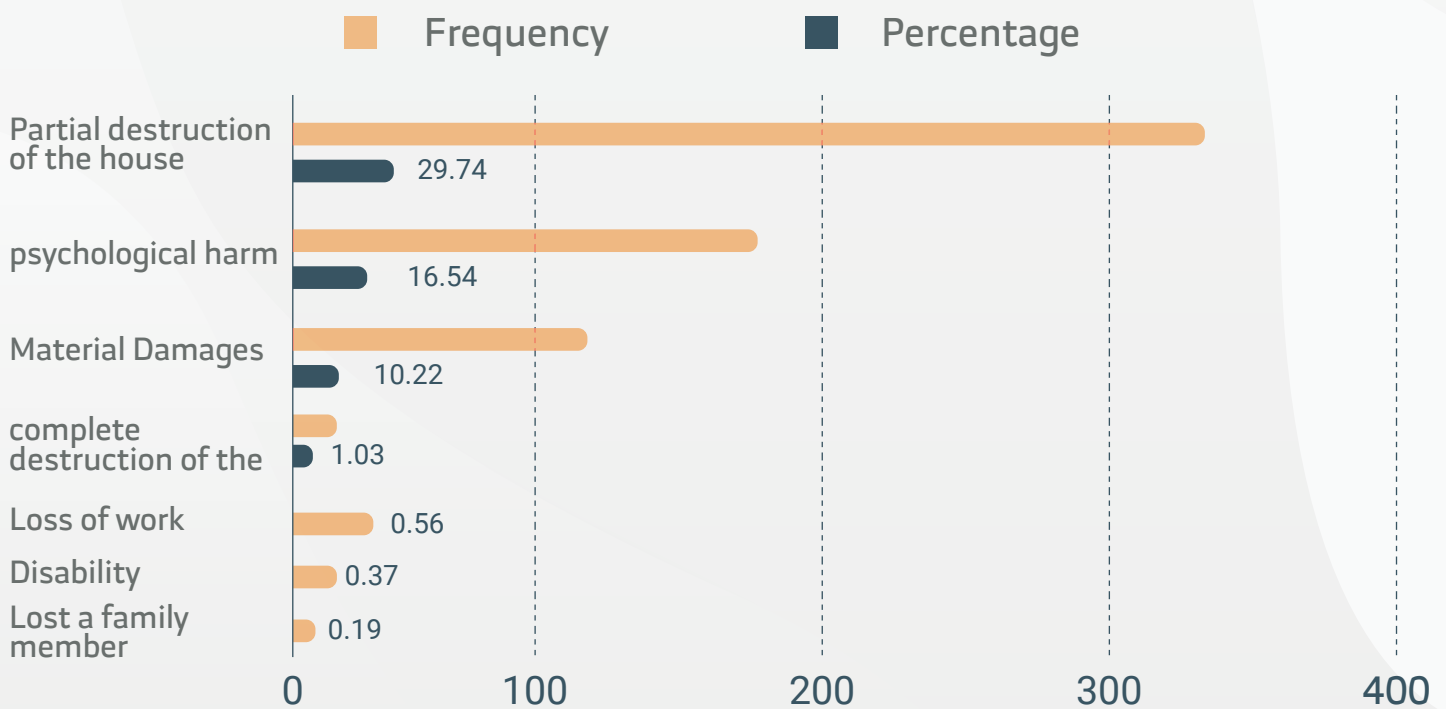
The ongoing conflict and natural disasters have resulted in massive displacement within and around Jisr Al-Shughour. Many families have been displaced multiple times, seeking refuge in makeshift camps, with some living under olive trees or with relatives in rural areas. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) face dire living conditions, lacking adequate shelter, food, water, and healthcare.

Furthermore, a significant percentage of families have been exposed to the destruction of homes, lands, or property, exacerbating their vulnerability and need for support. According to the 7 FGDs conducted by Equity and Empowerment with 112 women from April- May 2024 as follows:



Sub district	Community	# Of HHs	# Of HHs suffer from a physical or mental disability	# Of HHs suffer from chronic disease	GBV Female		
					23 and above	Female 60 and over	The adolescent group
Janudiyeh	Zuf	18			14	4	
Janudiyeh	Hamama	13			13	0	
Janudiyeh	Janudiyeh	12			12	0	
Jisr-Ash-Shugur	Mashta Al Ateq	28	1		23	5	
Janudiyeh	Sokkariyeh	41	1		36	5	
Total	7	112	2		98	14	

HOW THEY ARE AFFECTED BY THE EARTHQUAKE



However, there has been a notable return of IDPs to Jisr Al-Shughour, despite the challenging circumstances, which reflects the resilience and determination of the local population. However, the returnees face numerous challenges, including limited access to essential services, ongoing security threats, and inadequate support systems. As of November 2023, OCHA reported over 300 spontaneous return movements to Jisr Al-Shughour, indicating a significant need for sustainable support and rehabilitation efforts.¹



Economic And Social Impact

The economic situation in Jisr Al-Shughour has been severely impacted by the conflict and natural disasters. The local economy, which relied heavily on agriculture and small businesses, has been devastated. Many families have lost their livelihoods, leading to widespread poverty and food insecurity. The economic collapse has also disrupted the education system, with many schools either destroyed or repurposed as emergency shelters.

¹<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-idp-spontaneous-returns-november-2023-enartr>

The psychological impact of the conflict and disasters is profound. Many residents, particularly women and children, suffer from trauma and stress-related disorders. The lack of mental health services exacerbates these conditions, making psychosocial support a critical need. Furthermore, the social fabric of the community has been torn apart, with traditional support networks disrupted by displacement and violence.

Focus on Women's Needs

Women in Jisr Al-Shughour face unique challenges that are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict and recent natural disasters. These challenges include limited access to healthcare, increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV), economic insecurity, and psychological trauma. Addressing these needs requires targeted interventions that prioritize women's health, protection, economic empowerment, and psychosocial support.

Based on the FGDs conducted, 50% of respondents said that women and women with disabilities cannot be included in activities in area because traditions and customs do not allow this, while 50% they can.

This data is linked to understanding the community's perceptions and practices regarding gender and disability inclusion, highlighting variations across different sub-districts. These insights are crucial for designing interventions that effectively address the unique challenges faced by women in the region.

Health and protection

Access to healthcare, especially sexual and reproductive health (SRH)

services, is severely limited in Jisr Al-Shughour. Many women lack access to essential hygiene products, safe spaces, and medical care, increasing their vulnerability to health complications and GBV. The distribution of dignity kits, which include sanitary pads, soap, and other hygiene products, has been a vital intervention to support women's health and dignity. These kits provide essential items that help women maintain their health and hygiene during the post-earthquake recovery phase.

In addition to dignity kits, SRH and GBV awareness sessions are crucial for educating women about their health rights and available support services. These sessions empower women with knowledge about contraception, family planning, and protection against GBV. They also highlight the importance of integrated services that address both SRH and GBV needs, providing comprehensive healthcare, legal support, and access to emergency contraception and STI testing for survivors of GBV.

Considering these findings, there is a pressing need for awareness-raising sessions aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of many practices. These sessions can play a pivotal role in educating community members about the detrimental effects of underage marriage on girls' physical and mental health, educational opportunities, and overall well-being. Ultimately, investing in comprehensive awareness campaigns is essential for fostering a supportive environment that promotes gender equality and prevents the perpetuation of harmful practices.

According to 64% the women who attended the FGDs, there is a high

possibility for girls to marry under 18 years old which reflects a concerning aspect of the challenges faced by women in Jisr Al-Shughour. In areas affected by conflict and natural disasters, underage marriage rates tend to increase due to various socio-economic factors. This statistic underscores the urgency of addressing women's needs, as early marriage often leads to adverse health outcomes, limited educational opportunities, and perpetuates cycles of poverty. Therefore, understanding and addressing the root causes behind this percentage is essential for crafting effective interventions that safeguard the rights and well-being of women and girls in the community.

Psychosocial Support And Community ngagement

The psychological well-being of women in Jisr Al-Shughour is a significant concern. Many women have experienced trauma and stress due to the conflict and natural disasters. Structured physical activities, such as those outlined in the IFRC's Moving Together toolkit, have shown to enhance psychological and physical well-being. These activities foster social connections, provide a sense of belonging, and reduce feelings of isolation and stress.

Psychosocial support activities tailored specifically for women are essential for promoting mental health and community cohesion. Regular physical sessions for women not only improve physical health but also offer a safe space for social interaction and emotional support. These activities help mitigate the trauma experienced by women and promote resilience within the community.

85% of FGDs participants identified "PSS activities" as the most important protection services that their region needs at present, 75% stated "Public awareness", 70% stated "case management".

Livelihoods and Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is critical for enhancing the resilience of women in Jisr Al-Shughour. Early Recovery and Livelihoods (ERL) programs tailored for women are designed to provide them with skills and opportunities to generate income. Vocational training in areas such as crochet and electronics maintenance has been prioritized based on community surveys and focus group discussions.

Training programs equip women with practical skills that can be used to start small businesses or seek employment. These programs aim to create sustainable economic opportunities, enabling women to support their families and contribute to the local economy. Furthermore, showcasing the products created through these training programs in exhibitions helps to promote women's work and connect them with potential customers and markets.



Equity and **Empowerment's**
Detailed Analysis and
Strategic Implementation

Enhancing Health Services

Improving healthcare access, particularly for women's SRH, is paramount. The first step is to establish mobile health clinics that can reach remote areas and IDP camps. These clinics should be equipped with necessary medical supplies and staffed by trained healthcare professionals, including gynecologists and midwives. Also, partnerships with international NGOs and local health organizations can help expand the reach and impact of these services.



Dignity kits should be distributed regularly, and their contents should be culturally appropriate and tailored to meet the specific needs of women in different age groups. To ensure sustainability, local women can be trained to assemble and distribute these kits, providing them with an additional source of income. SRH and GBV awareness sessions should be conducted in safe, accessible locations. These sessions should cover a wide range of topics, including menstrual hygiene management, contraception, family planning, and GBV prevention and response. Collaboration with local community leaders and women's groups can help to ensure that these sessions are well-attended and culturally sensitive.



Strengthening Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support programs should be integrated into the broader health and protection framework. Establishing community centers that offer a range of psychosocial services, including counseling, support groups, and recreational activities, can provide women with much-needed support. These centers should be staffed by trained mental health professionals who can provide individual and group therapy sessions.

Physical activities, such as yoga, dance, and sports, can play a significant role in improving mental health. These activities should be organized regularly and tailored to the interests and cultural norms of the community. Providing safe spaces for these activities, along with necessary equipment and trained instructors, is essential for their success.

Additionally, creating peer support networks can help women share their experiences and build resilience. These networks can be facilitated by trained community volunteers who can offer guidance and support to their peers.



Strengthening Psychosocial Support

Economic empowerment programs should focus on providing women with marketable skills and opportunities to generate income. Vocational training programs in areas such as crochet, tailoring, electronics maintenance, and food processing should be expanded. These programs should be designed based on market assessments to ensure that the skills being taught are in demand.

Providing start-up grants or microloans can help women start their own businesses. These financial resources should be coupled with business training that covers topics such as financial management, marketing, and customer service. Additionally, creating cooperatives can help women pool their resources and market their products more effectively.

Organizing regular exhibitions and markets where women can showcase and sell their products can help them gain visibility and build a customer base. These events should be widely publicized and supported by local authorities and community leaders.



Improving Infrastructure and Services

Repairing critical infrastructure is essential for improving living conditions in Jisr Al-Shughour. This includes repairing damaged healthcare facilities, schools, and water and sanitation systems. Collaboration with international donors and development agencies can help secure the necessary funding and technical expertise for these projects.

Ensuring that IDPs and returnees have access to basic services such as clean water, food, and shelter is a priority. Establishing temporary shelters that are safe and equipped with essential amenities can provide immediate relief. Long-term housing solutions should also be developed, with a focus on building resilient and sustainable communities.



Facilitating Community Engagement

Community engagement is critical for the success of humanitarian interventions. Involving local women's groups and community leaders in the planning and implementation of projects ensures that interventions are culturally appropriate and address the community's actual needs.

Establishing community committees that include representatives from different segments of the population can facilitate dialogue and decision-making. These committees can provide valuable feedback on ongoing projects and help identify emerging needs.

Promoting social cohesion through community-based initiatives, such as cultural events, educational programs, and recreational activities, can help rebuild the social fabric of the community. These initiatives should be inclusive and encourage participation from all members of the community, regardless of their background.





Some Quotes From Focused Group Discussion Sessions

"We haven't received any services in our area because of the ongoing conflicts. This makes it hard to access basic services, leaving families in desperate need of support and assistance."

"Getting dignity kits with things like sanitary pads and soap is so important for us. It's not easy to find these things, especially when everything is so unavailable. It helps us stay clean and healthy, which is crucial."

"These sessions about our health rights are very helpful. Knowing what to do in tough situations gives us strength to protect ourselves and our loved ones."

"Having a place to go where we can talk to someone and share our feelings really helps. It's hard to keep everything inside, and support groups make us feel less alone."

"Doing things like sports together helps us forget about our troubles for a while."

"Talking to other women who understand what we're going through is so comforting. We're like a little family, helping each other get through the tough times."

"We want to learn new skills so we can work and earn money to help our families."

"Having the chance to start our own businesses with a little support makes
"Showing off our products at markets and exhibitions makes us feel proud.
It's not just about selling things; it's about showing the world what we're
capable of."

"Fixing up our schools and healthcare facilities would mean the world to us.
It's not just about buildings; it's about investing in our children's future and
our community's health."

"Having safe shelters with clean water and toilets is a basic necessity. It's
hard to focus on anything else when you're worried about where you'll sleep
or how you'll stay clean."

"Being involved in planning our community's future gives us a sense of
ownership. It's not just about what's good for some people; it's about
what's good for all of us."

RECOMMENDATIONS



- Deploy mobile health units equipped with essential medical supplies and staffed by trained healthcare professionals to provide sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, general healthcare, and mental health support in remote areas and IDP camps.
- Regularly distribute dignity kits containing sanitary pads, soap, and other hygiene products. Ensure that the contents are culturally appropriate and tailored to meet the needs of women across different age groups.
- Integrating multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) alongside dignity kits can provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls, in humanitarian setting.
- Organize awareness sessions on sexual and reproductive health, family planning, and gender-based violence prevention. These sessions should be accessible, culturally sensitive, and involve local community leaders to ensure wider acceptance and participation.
- Establish community centers offering psychosocial support services, including individual and group counseling, support groups, and recreational activities. Incorporate physical activities like yoga, dance, and sports to

promote mental health and community cohesion.

- Develop and expand vocational training programs focused on marketable programs. These programs should be based on market assessments to ensure they meet local demand.
- Provide start-up grants or microloans to women to help them start small businesses. Couple financial support with business training in financial management, marketing, and customer service.
- Implement comprehensive protection services, including case management and public awareness campaigns, to address and prevent gender-based violence. Focus on creating safe spaces for women and providing legal and psychosocial support.
- Involve local women's groups and community leaders in planning and implementing humanitarian projects. Establish community committees representing different population segments to facilitate dialogue, decision-making, and feedback on ongoing and future projects.
- Promote social cohesion through community-based initiatives like cultural events, educational programs, and recreational activities. These initiatives should be inclusive and encourage participation from all community members, fostering a supportive and united environment.

CONCLUSION

The humanitarian situation in Jisr Al-Shughour remains critical, with women facing significant challenges due to the ongoing conflict and recent natural disasters. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that prioritizes women's health, protection, economic empowerment, and psychosocial support. By implementing targeted interventions and supporting local initiatives, we can help rebuild the resilience of women in Jisr Al-Shughour and promote sustainable development in this conflict-affected region.

This policy brief has synthesized information from the provided project proposal document, emphasizing the current challenges and proposing actionable recommendations to improve the situation for women in Jisr Al-Shughour. For more detailed implementation plans and specific project activities, refer to the original proposal document.

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If we would



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