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GENDER RESPONSIVE WHEAT VALUE CHAIN ANALYSIS REPORT

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Acronyms

BLRS	Building Local Resilience in Syria
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CEFM	Child, Early and Force Marriage
DAANES	Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria
GRVC	Gender-Responsive Value Chain
GBCs	Gender-Based Constrains
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GoS	Government of Syria
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
KIs	Key Informants
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
IPV	Intimate partner violence
NES	Northeast Syria
SYP	Syrian Pound
USD	United States Dollar
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a gender analysis of the wheat value chain in Areesha and Hassakeh sub-districts of Northeast Syria (NES). It aims to provide in-depth gender analysis of wheat value chain and map all actors involved in the process, their interactions and power relations, gender-based constraints and entry points for integration of women, youth and the disadvantaged groups into the market system. The analysis explores the gender division of labour along the chain, what specific tasks women and men perform, how they interact with other actors, who has access and control over resources and assets, voice and agency. Also, it examines the broader environment and identify the factors reinforcing gender inequalities and affecting the position of women and men including disadvantaged groups in the wheat value chain.

The study is based on qualitative research design combining primary and secondary data to triangulate findings. Primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), targeted at various sub-groups including women and men farmers, youth, people with disabilities, illiterate women, divorced and widowed women, older women and men. In total 63 individuals participated in study, 50 percent of whom were women, 10 percent were people with disabilities and 30 percent were youth.

The analysis highlights the importance of women's contribution to the wheat value chain particularly in production and post-harvest handling stages. They are involved in labor-intensive activities such as planting, weeding, fertilizing and harvesting, and wheat to bread processing. Women participate less in the later stages of the wheat value chain such as trading, formal processing, and consequently benefit less from value chain development. Despite women playing a significant role in wheat production, wheat is widely considered a male-dominated sector due to gender norms and socio-economic factors that limit women's visibility, participation, and recognition in the sector.

The findings show that women, youth and people with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers in their access to resources and services, agricultural land and larger assets, information and decision-making, new technologies and agricultural inputs. At the same time water and energy constraints further contribute to rural women's time poverty and income losses. In the assessment of the enabling environment and support services, participants also highlighted how social norms and stereotypes, existing laws and practices continue to discriminate against women, people with disabilities in their access to resources and services.

The primary research suggests that different sub-groups of study population experience varying degrees of disadvantages based on gender, disability, age, economic status and other characteristics.

People living with disabilities face various constraints to engage in value chain activities depending on the nature and severity of disabilities. PWD continue to face stigma, discrimination and isolation when trying to engage in economic and social activities. They often end up serving as helpers in family farming and rarely find jobs outside the home. Female living with disabilities may face double marginalization because of gender and stigma towards persons with disabilities.

Young women and men have limited opportunities to earn decent living, access jobs and skills education and participate in value chain activities. In addition, socio-cultural perceptions about the role of women, the burden of unpaid care work, restrictive gender norms, mobility and safety constraints significantly contribute to the lower socio-economic status of young women and girls.

Divorced and widowed women face daily struggles to break deeply rooted gender stereotypes, particularly when they engage in non-traditional activities that are commonly perceived as men's work, such as agricultural trade, or machinery operation. Additionally, they face difficulties in being taken seriously while negotiating with other value chain actors such as traders who are predominantly men. These barriers further restrict their participation and advancement within the value chain.

Illiterate women face significant challenges in accessing information, livelihood opportunities, and formal jobs within the value chain. A lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills affects their self-confidence, limiting their ability to interact with other value chain actors and restricting their access to resources and opportunities.

This report identifies the need for implementing gender-responsive value chain interventions and proposes a set of recommendations for addressing gender-based constraints along the chain, which is crucial for effective integration of women, youth and the disadvantaged groups into the market system. In wheat production, where women already play an important role, it will be important to ensure that any value chain intervention does not result in their exclusion. Projects supporting the development of the wheat value chain need to make greater efforts to ensure that women, youth and the disadvantaged groups have access to resources and services, decision-making, new technologies and opportunities to participate in higher stages of value chain.

Main Findings of Gender-Responsive Value Chain Analysis (GRVC):

Restrictive gender norms and the gender division of labour along the chain limit participation of women in higher stages of value chain

The field research conducted for this report shows that deeply entrenched gender norms, the gender division of labour, and power dynamics confine women's participation to the production stage of the wheat value chain, and restrict their access to decision-making, resources, and opportunities to advance to later stages of the value chain. In family farming, women are extensively involved in labour-intensive activities such as manual land preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest handling activities. At the same time, they take care of the household, children and dependents, animals and work as agricultural wage laborers on nearby farms. Men are stereotypically expected to be the 'head of the family' and the major decision-makers in and outside the family. The study found that men make up the majority in capital-intensive activities, leading business dealings with service providers, managing machinery, engaging in formal processing, and trading activities.

Women have limited decision-making power in and outside the family

Traditional gender and social norms shape power dynamics and decision-making patterns in the household and community. The study found that decision-making power on principal family matters, particularly managing financial resources and assets, selling animals, crop production, sending children to school, mobility of women and girls are in the hands of men. Besides, men play a larger role in value chain governance structures such as farmers' organizations and cooperatives due to the association of men with the public sphere and women with the domestic sphere. Women limited bargaining power at the individual and household level affects their ability to maintain control over resources and influence important decisions around their mobility and participation in more profitable value chain activities.

Women have limited ownership of agricultural land and other properties

Due to cultural norms and inheritance practices favoring sons over daughters, women have unequal access to productive assets, such as land, livestock, machinery, and other properties. Control over land is often a precondition for accessing inputs and subsidies, participating in cooperative and farmer's organizations and consequently, a lack of land ownership is a key constraint to women's engagement in value chain. More importantly, a lack of control over land and other property further illustrates low social status and position of women in the family and community.

Lack of access to finance negatively affects women's participation in higher stages of the wheat value chain

Limited access to finance is a key constraint for women wheat producers to shift from production to higher stages of the value chain and engage in entrepreneurship. In the absence of formal finance, wheat producers (particularly women processors) find it very difficult to mobilize capital for acquiring high quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, upgrading machinery, and shifting to solar energy. Women respondents emphasized that they do not have access to funding schemes except for when they are specifically targeted by NGO projects. The study found that wheat producers purchase inputs on credit from traders, which has a negative impact on their livelihoods, as interest rates can reach up to 70 percent.

Women's access to information, new technologies and agricultural inputs is lower compared to men

Unequal access to information, knowledge and agricultural inputs are key constraints to women's productivity in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Because of limited access to necessary information and services, women's representation tends to be concentrated in the least profitable activities, and they are often unable to move to later stages along the chain. Restrictive socio-cultural norms, transportation constraints, and remoteness of the services, make it difficult for women to travel and interact with service providers. Furthermore, service providers fail to recognize women's contribution to the wheat value chain and provide adequate services, considering gender-based constraints (GBCs) prevailing along the chain.

Access to large, more profitable and wholesale markets are limited for women, youth and other disadvantaged groups

Due to restrictive gender norms, discriminatory practices, mobility and time constraints, women are minimally involved in trading. Men are stereotypically associated with wholesale marketing, and therefore women are rarely engaged in business dealings. The study found that men are primarily represented as wheat and flour traders and importers, while women are excluded from these roles.

Women's social capital remains low compared to men

Women and girls continue to be underrepresented in cooperatives, farmers committees, and grassroot movements both as members and as chairpersons. Fostering women-only informal groups is crucial to ensure increased participation, access to resources, networks, leadership and decision-making of women and girls. The study found that women's role and contributions often remain invisible and unrecognized within mixed groups, especially when women are not presented in leadership positions.

Energy and water constraints has a negative impact on women and girls time use

Water and energy constraints remain the most critical challenges for wheat producers and processors. The study participants identified the reduction of water resources, late rainfall, limited availability of water and irrigation sources as key challenges impacting wheat production, causing

harvest and income losses in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Limited access to water and basic energy resources particularly affects women, adding an extra burden to their workload and time use.

Women are major players at the production level

The study found that while women's representation is largely concentrated at the production level, they are underrepresented in trading, marketing, formal processing, and value chain governance. Women continue to face gender-based constraints (GBCs) in their access to productive resources and services, decision-making, and entrepreneurial and income-generating activities, which negatively affect their participation in higher stages of the chain. Cultural norms still prevent women from entering decision-making spaces and having leadership positions. Therefore, women value chain actors are often excluded from value chain governance structure and decision-making processes.

Gender-based violence (GBV) affect women and girls' health, productive capacity and participation in value chain

Women and girls continue to face various forms of violence including physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence in Areesha sub-district. GBV cases most often go unreported, due to the lack of adequate legal framework and support services. This negatively impacts not only the health and overall well-being of survivors, but also their productive capacity and participation in value chain.

Institutional environment is not equally enabling for participation of women and men including disadvantaged groups

A lack of inclusive sectoral policies and strategies creates additional challenges for value chain actors, particularly for women and the disadvantaged groups, in accessing more advanced stages of the chain. There are still discriminatory attitudes found among service providers, who often fail to recognize women's role and contribution to the wheat sector or assist them in addressing systemic barriers. In the assessment of the enabling environment and support services, participants also highlighted how social norms and stereotypes, existing laws and practices continue to discriminate against women, people with disabilities in their access to resources and services.

Introduction

Study Objectives

Women are extensively involved in wheat production, which is typically considered a male-dominated sector in Areesha and Hassakeh sub-districts of Northeast Syria (NES). Small-scale farmers, particularly women, youth, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups, continue to face various constraints to engage in value addition, trading and more profitable activities along the chain. Water and energy constraints, high prices of production inputs, a lack of financial support limit the ability of small producers especially women and other disadvantaged groups to fully participate and benefit from value chain.

Considering the strategic importance of wheat for rural households' food security and livelihoods in Northeast Syria (NES), CARE's Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) project aims to strengthen women's role within the chain and support the meaningful participation, decision-making and leadership of women, girls and disadvantaged groups. The BLRS project supports women, youth and disadvantaged groups through capacity building, improving access to markets, finance, agricultural goods and services, self-organization in farmer's cooperatives and women's groups, and developing local capacities for gender-responsive services. The targeted areas for CARE under the BLRS project include 95 rural communities in Northeast Syria in Al-Hasakeh Governorate, Areesha sub-district.

This study contributes to the development of Gender-Responsive Value Chain (GRVC)¹, targeting rural women, youth and disadvantaged groups and addressing their economic and social empowerment, access to markets and critical services to ensure that "no one is left behind" in value chain development.

The **overarching objective** of this study is to look at wheat value chain through gender lens and map all actors involved in the process, their interactions and power relations, gender-based constraints (GBCs) and entry points for integration of women, youth and the disadvantaged groups into the market system.

Specifically, the study objectives were to:

- a) Assess gender roles and responsibilities of women and men, girls and boys in the household and community and how it affects their participation in value chain activities.
- b) Understand power relations and decision-making patterns in the household and community and its influence on women and men value chain stakeholders to access services and resources.

¹ Gender-responsive approaches recognize and address the specific needs and priorities of men and women

- c) Identify practices and participation of women and men including disadvantaged groups in the wheat value chain and map gender-based constraints (GBCs) they face throughout the chain.
- d) Identify prevailing harmful practices and gender-based violence (GBV) forms threatening well-being of women and girls and preventing them to fully engage and benefit from economic and social activities.
- e) Assess the broader context and enabling the environment to understand how gender equality and social inclusion is supported by local policies, strategies and legal frameworks as well as gender-responsiveness of support services.
- f) Address data gaps and generate new evidence to inform BLRS phase II value chain interventions and its wider programming

Since the study addresses in-depth gender analysis of wheat value chain, the conceptual framework draws from FAO's Gender-Responsive Value Chain (GRVC)² framework which identifies existing gender inequalities within the value chain and proposes measures to address it. The framework considers two aspects of analysis at the household and the individual level. The individual level analysis focuses on the differences between men and women in terms of roles, responsibilities, practices, unique challenges and needs of value chain stakeholders. Whereas the household level analysis seeks to identify intra-household dynamics, decision-making patterns, the division of labor between women and men, access and control of resources and benefits and household members' involvement in the value chain activities. The GRVC framework connects individuals and households along the VC in production, aggregation, processing, and market distribution and at the same time looks at the institutions and support services and how they cater the needs of women and men value chain stakeholders. This framework helps to analyze the root causes of constraints faced by men and women value chain stakeholders seen from individual and household levels affecting women's and men's opportunities and participation in value chain activities.³

The research findings aim to inform the next stages of the Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) project in the implementation of wheat value chain interventions. It can also contribute to knowledge generation, advocacy and gender responsive market interventions in Northeast Syria.

Methodology

The analysis draws upon the desk review of secondary data and primary research to explore gender and social inclusion gaps in wheat value chain, and potential value chain development on reducing gender inequalities and enabling economic empowerment of women, youth and the disadvantaged groups. It also examines the intersection of gender and social inclusion, considering how factors

² FAO. (2016). Developing gender-sensitive value chains. A guiding framework. Available at <https://www.fao.org/3/i6462e/i6462e.pdf>

³ Ibid.

such as disability, age, gender, and other demographics affect participation of value chain stakeholders along the chain. Furthermore, institutional gaps and capacity-building needs of the service providers are explored to find entry points to making interventions responsive to diverse gender and inclusion-related needs of value chain stakeholders.

Secondary data collection included the review of existing studies, published, unpublished, and grey literature to understand a broader picture of wheat value chain and its economic, social and gender context. The desk review focuses on reviewing wheat studies and reports, food security and livelihoods (FSL) interventions, gender analysis reports and other key strategic documents.

Primary data collection included focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) which took place in the study sites across Areesha and Hadadya communities of Al-Hassakeh governorate in November 2024. The focus group guide was prepared and tested with women and men groups across study sites. The focus group guide included semi-structured questions on gender roles and responsibilities of women and men as well as boys and girls, decision-making in a family and community, ownership of land and other properties, access to finance, information, machinery, markets, participation in value chain activities, prevailing harmful practices in the community. A purposeful sampling technique was used to ensure the representation of various groups and individuals who possess unique perspectives, experiences, or knowledge that are essential for addressing the research objectives. Participants included young women and men, older women and men, people living with disabilities, illiterate women, divorced and widowed women involved in wheat value chain activities to understand the intersectional and gender dynamics as it relates to value chain participation. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new or significant information emerged.

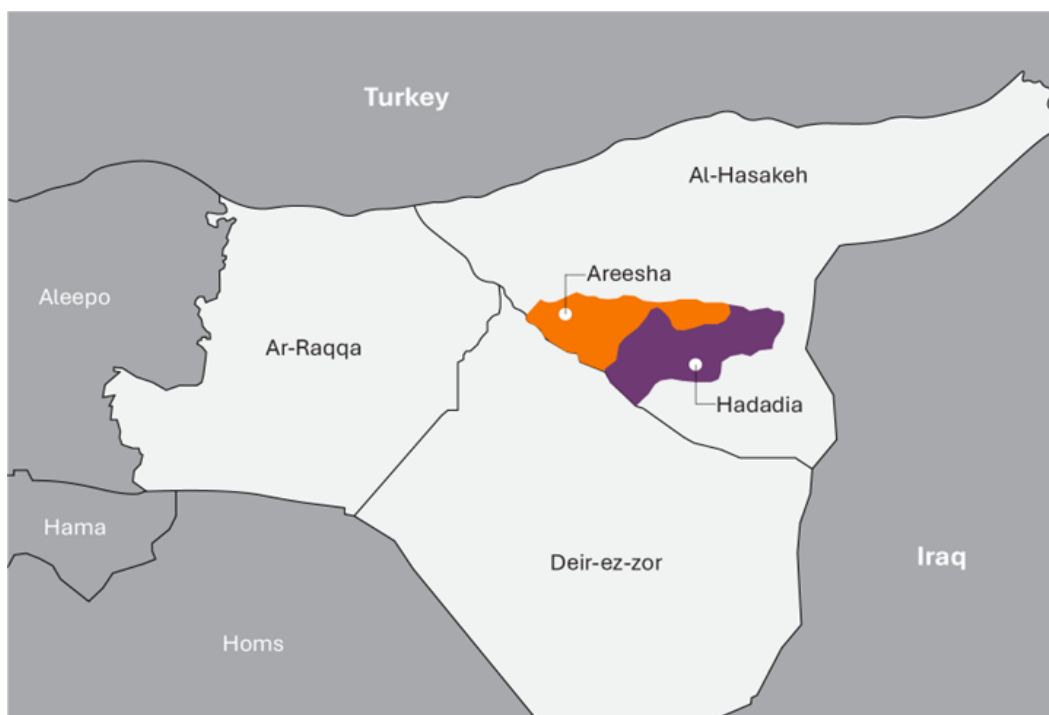
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with agricultural extension services⁴, implementing partners, agricultural department from DAANES, local councils, working groups, processors, traders etc. In total **12 KIIs** were conducted engaging **12 individuals (4 women and 8 men)**.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) – A total of **5 focus group discussions (FGDs)** took place with wheat producers including female and male only groups and mixed ones engaging **51 individuals (28 women and 23 men)** in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Among the focus group participants, 10 percent were people with disabilities.

⁴ “Agricultural extension is the application of scientific research and new knowledge to agricultural practices through farmer education”. Available at <https://www.fao.org/faolex/glossary/en/>

Table 1: Information on focus groups conducted in November 2024

Value Chain Stakeholder	Location	# of focus groups	Total Participants	Age Range	Disabilities
Women	Areeshah and Hadadya	2	22	25-70	1 Visual
Men	Areeshah and Hadadya	1	13	25-70	3 physical, 1 auditory
Girls	Areeshah and Hadadya	1	6	18-25	
Boys	Areeshah and Hadadya	1	10	18-25	
Total		5	51	18-70	5

Figure 1: Data Coverage Map



Limitations and Challenges:

The study faced several limitations, including safety and movement restrictions, limited technical capacity of enumerators, and language barriers, all of which affected the quality of the data collected.

- Primary data collection was hampered by safety and movement limitations caused by ongoing conflict escalations and security incidents.
- The lack of locally available qualified enumerators and facilitators along with a prolonged recruitment process caused some delays in the data collection process.
- Language barriers and the translation process also affected the length of focus group discussions and caused discomfort for the participants.

Additionally, challenges were encountered in reaching specific groups of study population such as persons with disabilities, policymakers from DAANES as well as gathering reliable information on gender-based violence (GBV) due to the sensitivity of the topic. To address these challenges, apart from focus groups, key-informant interviews were conducted with CSOs and local authorities working in those communities, which was further triangulated with the findings from desk research.

- Challenges were observed in terms of accessing people with disabilities and engaging them in research. Even though specific efforts were made to map potential respondents living with disabilities beforehand, it became very challenging to ensure their participation in the focus group discussions.
- Challenges were encountered in accessing policymakers from DAANES, particularly those in the agricultural cooperative departments. Therefore, it was not possible to discuss sector specific policy priorities and strategies with policymakers.
- Due to the high sensitivity of GBV issues, it was particularly challenging to obtain a clear picture of prevailing gender-based violence (GBV) in the communities. Thus, in order to collect sufficient information, apart from focus groups, interviews were conducted with the Women's Committee⁵ working on GBV issues in those communities.

⁵ Women's committee operates under the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria's (DAANES) and addresses women's organizational matters within the institutions of DAANES as well as provides community awareness sessions about GBV issues and protection mechanisms in communities.

Summary Findings

Wheat Sector Overview

Wheat has a strategic importance for food security and livelihoods of rural households in Northeast Syria (NES). Since 2011, wheat production has been severely disrupted by conflict and climate change. In 2021 wheat production reached 400,000 tons which was 42% of 2020 production⁶. Drought and water crises, fuel shortages, limited availability of quality wheat seeds, high prices of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds and a lack of financial and technical support for the production process undermines productivity of small producers. At the same time, a shortage of local wheat grains and flour, water and energy constraints, a lack of adequate storage facilities, custom fees and transportation restrictions, a lack of access to capital and new technologies affect productivity and efficiency of stakeholders involved in value addition and higher stages throughout the chain ⁷.

The study found that protectionist policies of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria's (DAANES) do not equally benefit all categories of farmers. DAANES plays a significant role in subsidizing production inputs, seeds, fertilizers, fuel for licenced farmers and agrarian associations. It worth noting that women, youth, and other disadvantaged groups represent the majority of unlicensed producers who do not own agricultural land and have no access to the subsidies. At the same time, the women's committee which operates under DAANES actively advocates for women' right to land and conducts awareness raising campaigns with rural communities. However, no significant policy changes were observed regarding the reformulation of land ownership requirements to enable women farmers to more easily access governmental support services.

Moreover, the role of DAANES is minimal in securing fertilizers and pesticides, which are imported by traders without any price control.⁸ The study participants expressed their frustration with traders having full control over prices and exploiting their situation. It was also noted that DAANES is a main buyer of wheat grains accounting for 80% of total production in Northeast Syria. It determines the purchase price in consultation of agricultural committees and local subcommittees, which is 10-20% higher than the prices offered by traders⁹. The study participants highlighted that due to high transportation costs associated with delivery of wheat grains to delivery points of DAANES and waiting period which exceeds several days and delays in payment, they prefer to sell wheat to traders even at lower prices.

⁶ NES Agriculture Working Group (AWG) & iMMAP. (October 2021) Crop Monitoring and Food Security Situation NES 2020/2021 Winter Season Post Harvest Overview

⁷ Referred by KIs and FGD participants

⁸ Impact Research. (2022). Wheat Production Value Chain in Northeast Syria. Available: https://impactres.org/reports/PolicyPapers/Wheat_production_value_chain_in_NES.pdf

⁹Ibid.

Primary data verified the major challenges identified in the secondary sources such as limited access to production inputs, new technologies, adequate storage facilities, a lack of financial and technical support for the production process, water and energy constraints which affect the productivity of women and men value chain actors. In addition, field data revealed that the challenges mentioned above particularly affect small producers including women, who play an important role in wheat production activities. While secondary data lack gender perspectives on women's participation and contribution to the wheat value chain, decision-making power, and the control of benefits, primary data complements the gap and provides new insights. The findings from field data show that women are absent in formal processing, trading, and higher stages of the value chain due to gender-based constraints they face in their access to resources and services. While men are the majority players at collection, formal processing, and trading level. In addition, men have full control over agricultural land and larger assets, and they take decisions in and outside of the family. The field research also demonstrated that the participation of youth follows the rigid gender division of labour along the chain, which is mostly limited to production activities. The participation of people with disabilities in value chain activities remains very challenging due to stigma, isolation, discrimination and lack of supportive services. They are more likely to be involved as helpers in family farming.

Gender-Based Constraints (GBCs) Along the Chain:

Domain of Inquiry I: Gender Roles and Responsibilities:

A patriarchal value system shapes roles and responsibilities of women and men in Northeast Syria (NES). This implies a rigid division of roles regarding who does what, and how one is socially, economically, and legally positioned and treated. The reproductive roles assigned to women and girls assume that domestic and caregiving responsibilities are exclusively their duty. In contrast men and boys are expected to participate in social and economic activities due to their role as breadwinners.

“Men don't accept doing women's role, even though they can help women at home. We used to this custom”.

FGD participant female youth,
North Daebil community, Hadadya

The study found that the departure from these expectations is not welcomed in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Female and male participants of the focus groups believed that it is almost impossible to change gender roles due to local customs. Some male participants expressed gender stereotypes stating that women, in general, are not able to take men's roles due to the difficulty and physically demanding nature of these tasks. Female and male participants affirmed that it is as a

natural duty of women to take care of children, cook for family members, clean the house and perform other domestic chores. When male participants were asked about their contribution to

household duties, it was revealed that they do not engage in chores and taking feminine roles is often associated with shame. When women participants were asked if they wished their husbands to help them with domestic work, some participants wished so, while others considered that men's outside work was more important than domestic duties.

A rigid gender-based division of roles and responsibilities is reflected in how tasks are distributed between women and men, boys and girls in family farming. The study found that women equally participate in family farming along with their husbands. While men are usually involved in agricultural activities which is related to mechanization and outside work, women tend to be involved in manual and labor-intensive work. Focus group participant women reported that they are involved in wide range of agricultural activities include planting wheat

and barley, weeding, fertilizing, manual land preparation, and harvesting. Besides, they are working as wage laborers picking cotton and vegetables on nearby farmers. Activities that are stereotypically assigned to men include managing machinery, land ploughing and tilling, herding animals, dealing with transportation and going to the markets, and visiting input shops. The study found that widowed, single, and divorced women break this pattern by engaging in 'men's work' which is accepted by society as an exception. There are cases where men and women share workloads by participating in wheat planting and harvesting, as well as animal feeding, stall cleaning, and livestock management.

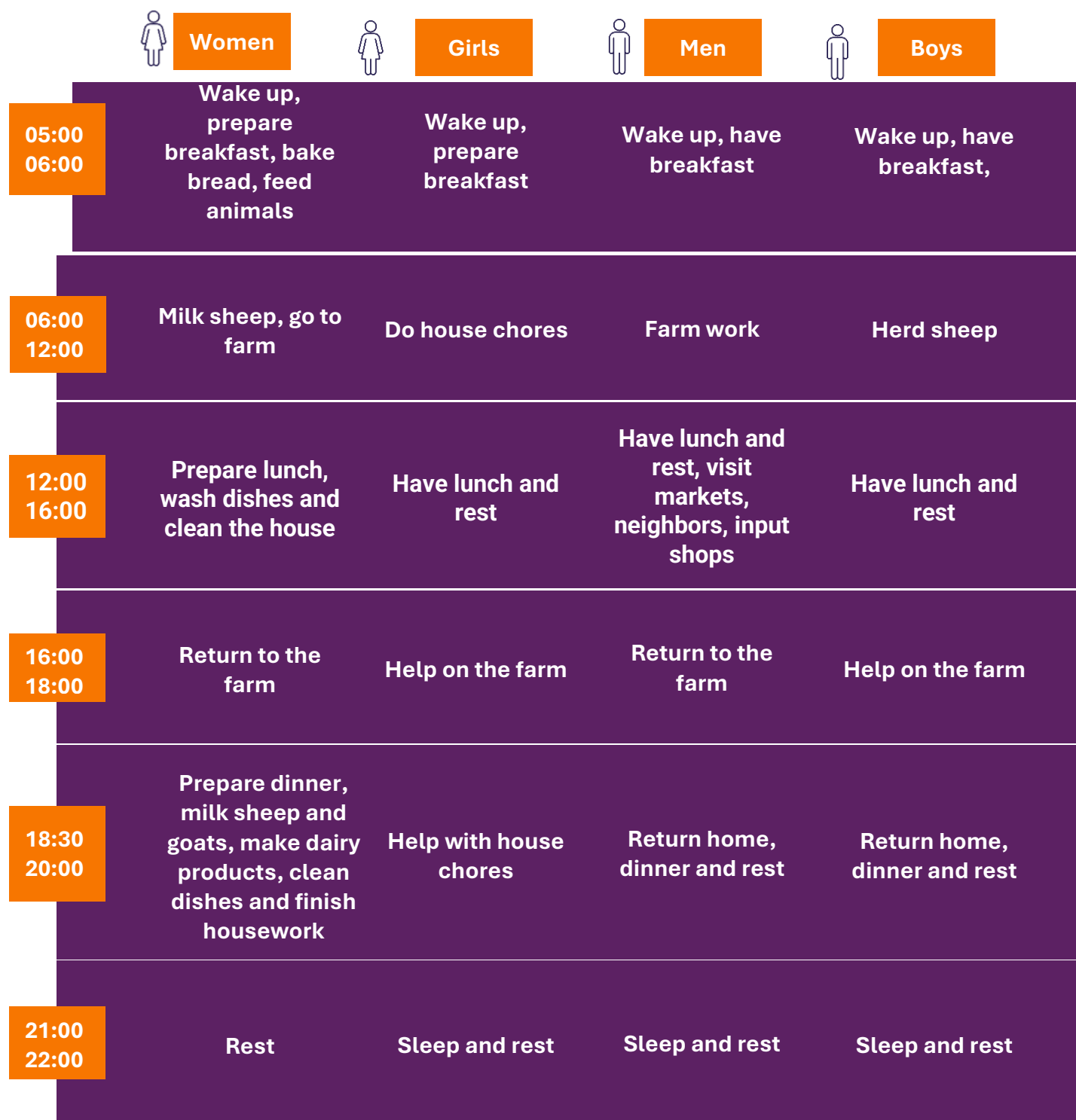
"I wish my husband would help me with house chores, but I prefer him to work outside the home and have stable job. I am happy to do housework while my husband works outside "

FGD participant female,

Youth activity patterns also reflect a rigid division of female/male roles. It was reported that girls usually assist their mothers with house chores and animal care, while boys are involved in farming activities along with their fathers in land tilling, irrigation, gathering fodder, and herding animals.

When analyzing the daily engagements and a time-use by women and men, the field research demonstrated that women have less free time due to domestic, agricultural, and care work, while men have more leisure time and a mobile daily routine. A time-use pattern shows the disproportionate amount of time women spend on domestic and care work compared to men. On top of that, women are also actively involved in family farming, livestock management, and agricultural wage labor, and therefore they have little rest time. The field research demonstrated that gender roles influence not only the distribution of household tasks but also determine which value chain activities are appropriate for women and men to perform. Men are often involved in capital intensive wheat farming activities that include technology and machinery, while women are mostly involved in labor-intensive work such as manual and preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest operation

Figure 2: Daily Time Use for Women, Men, Girls, and Boys:



Apart from the above, social perceptions about appropriate time uses for women particularly related to mobility outside the home and reproductive responsibilities affects how women spend their time. Women's time poverty is further exacerbated by water and energy restrictions. Without access to basic energy and water recourses women spend most of their day performing the time-consuming tasks of collecting biomass fuels, fetching water which creates additional barriers for women to engage in productive activities. Women's work burden and resulting time poverty explains why women miss opportunities to engage in income-generating activities arising from value chain development.

Domain of Inquiry II: Power Relations and Decision-making:

Traditional gender and social norms shape **power relations among women and men and decision-making dynamics** at the household and community level. At the household level, decision-making is usually in the hands of men. The study found that men make major household decisions including the allocation of household income and expenditures, major asset purchases (e.g., land, livestock),

“Women can't manage money. They irrationally spend money on things they do not need.”
Older Male, Areesha

decisions related to farm production and livestock management, children's education, membership in cooperatives, women and girls' mobility, and participation in community and social activities. Across study sites, women's decision-making is mostly limited to purchasing children's clothes, furniture and utensils, selling dairy products, and day-to-day domestic responsibilities. During

interviews, some strong stereotypes were found in the statements of men participants pointing to women's decision-making capacity.

During interviews, women voiced frustration that men have a full control over household income including women's earnings, often prioritizing their own personal needs. A woman's role in household finance is often restricted to managing small-scale household expenditures. This imbalance and women's limited control over household resources compromises their autonomy and bargaining power within the household, often leading to disparities in the distribution of resources. The unequal power dynamics also affect children, and the decision on education, health, and well-being of boys and girls are largely in the hands of men.

“It is difficult for women and girls to participate in a men's and boy's roles and carry out physically demanding tasks”.
Male Youth, Hadadya

Male and female youth narratives show progress, with both young girls and boys gaining more autonomy and decision-making power when it comes to choosing their marriage partners, without facing pressure from their families.” *I can say no to arranged marriage “- Female respondent in Hadadya.*

The narratives of separated women and/or widows participating in this study show that because of the protracted conflict, loss of male figures, migration, displacement, or divorce, they have full control over household resources and decision-making power. It was also reported that the community accepts the cases of widows and separated women having greater autonomy and decision-making power as exception, which do not shift social perceptions at broader level.

The study found that decisions related to mobility of women and girls are in the hands of men. Women usually seek permission from their husbands to move outside the home and participate in different activities. In contrast, men are free to move outside the home as they wish without consulting their spouses. Sociocultural norms and expectations along with safety concerns and transportation constraints still place significant restrictions on the movement of women and girls. The participant women mentioned that they feel safe to go outside their communities alone during daytime. However, they avoid movements during nighttime due to security and safety concerns. Low mobility, particularly among young women, has a significant negative impact on their participation in economic and social activities.

The study female participants strongly supported equitable distribution of decision-making power within the household. Female participants raised several suggestions to improve participatory and equitable decision-making processes at the household and community level. These included providing opportunities for couples to engage in awareness raising sessions on the importance of joint decision-making and conflict resolution within the household, implementing awareness-raising campaigns, and engaging men and boys to challenge gender stereotypes, empowering women and girls through access to education, vocational training, and income-generating activities, strengthening women's groups and networks to amplify their voices, involving community leaders in promoting more balanced power dynamics and decision-making at the household and community level.

Domain of Inquiry III: Access and Control Over Resources and Assets:

The study found that **women's limited access and ownership of productive assets**, such as land, livestock, machinery remains a key constraint to their engagement in wheat value chain activities. Due to cultural norms and inheritance practices favoring sons over daughters, women practically do not own high value assets such as agricultural land, livestock, property, except female-headed households. Legally, Syrian men and women have the same inheritance and property rights over land and other assets and Sharia law also guarantees women's property rights. However, social practices and norms in rural areas restrict women from exercising property rights, in part to prevent

“All assets are owned by men. Women do own assets.”
Male FGD participant in Hadadya

the transfer of property to the husband's family¹⁰. Control over land is often a precondition for accessing subsidies, participating in cooperatives and consequently, a lack of land ownership has significant implications on women's participation in wheat value chain. When participants were asked about the reason for this practice, female participants considered that men were the inheritors as they are perceived as the head of the household, major decision-makers and breadwinners. It was also reported that women are particularly vulnerable in case of divorce, because they have no rights over the land and other high value assets acquired before and during the marriage.



Through the 'Building Local Resilience in Syria' program funded by FCDO, Kamila received technical training, seeds and fertilizer to revive her farm.

¹⁰ Mercy Corps. (2023). Assessment Report Understanding Gender in Northeast Syria.p.43.

Access to information, extension services and technical know-how remains challenging for women wheat producers in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Female participants in the focus groups mentioned that they only have access to information, training, knowledge through NGO projects specifically targeting women. Restrictive socio-cultural norms, transportation constraints, and remoteness of the services make it difficult for women to travel and interact with service providers, who are mostly men. The exception was found in female-headed households where women step into men's roles and engage in business activities with support services.

“Men go out more than women which enable them to easily access to information and extension services.”

KIIs with input supplier in Areesha

The study found that women's access to timely information and technical training on agricultural technologies and practices largely depend on NGO projects. While women's contribution to the wheat value chain and their unique extension needs are often ignored by public and private providers who lack the capacity to target them effectively. KIIs with private input suppliers illustrated that women stakeholders are rarely perceived as important value chain actors, and therefore extension services are not adapted to their specific needs and interests. **“Our clients are mostly men who comes to our shop and request information on crop protection, irrigation and good practices. Because of local customs women stay at home and rarely visit us.”-KI in Areesha**



Key Informant Interview with input shop representative explaining the challenges faced by wheat producers in accessing production inputs

During the focus groups farmers raised concerns that **access to high-quality inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides** remain critical issues particularly for unlicensed small producers particularly for women. As it was reported only licensed agrarian committees and landowners have access to subsidized inputs provided by the Self Administration of Northeast Syria's (SANES). Besides, the concerns were raised that SANES only subsidized 30 kg seeds for irrigated land and 20 kg for rain-fed land which is not enough. Therefore, both

“I am not able to obtain quality seeds, fertilizers and pesticides due to high prices. For this reason, I purchase inputs on credits from traders and repay them in dollars after the harvest”.
FGD participant male in Areesha

“The production cost for one package of bread is 4,750 SYP while selling price is 5,000 SYP, leaving a profit margin of only 250 SYP.”
male processor, Al-Hasakeh city

licensed and unlicensed farmers end up purchasing wheat seeds from traders at prices 25% higher than those offered by SANES¹¹. The study participants also mentioned that there is no quality control and traders do not sell certified quality seeds. The access to fertilizers and pesticides also remains quite problematic, since the role of SANES in securing fertilizers and pesticides is minimal and traders have a full monopoly in the markets.

Focus group participant farmers complained about high price of inputs and mentioned that they purchase seeds, fertilizers and pesticides on credit from traders and pay their dues in U.S dollars. During the focus groups, women mentioned that their spouses are involved in dealings with input suppliers, and they make decision which inputs to purchase. The study found that women face more barriers to accessing machinery, pesticides, fertilizers, seeds than men because of mobility barriers, restrictive gender norms and stereotypes linking agricultural dealings with male gender roles. The KIs with processors revealed that private bakeries are predominantly operated by men. The primary operational challenges reported include insufficient local wheat flour supply, limited access to electricity, water, and fuel, inadequate storage facilities, the absence of testing laboratories, high customs fees, and transportation restrictions. KIs pointed to increased production costs because of insufficient subsidies from SANES and the purchase of fuel, water, and generator maintenance expenses.

Water and energy constraints remain the most critical challenges for wheat producers and processors. According to the Wheat to Bread Market System Assessment, 64% of farmers reported late rainfall and 58% of farmers reported low rainfall levels during 2022-2023¹². The study participants identified the reduction of water resources, late rainfall, limited availability of water and irrigation sources as key challenges impacting wheat production, causing harvest and income losses

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² iMMAP. (2023). Wheat to Bread Market Assessment - Part 1 Northeast Syria. Available: <https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Wheat-to-Bread-Market-Assessment-Final-Report.pdf>

in Northeast Syria (NES). Water crises particularly affect women who make up 70% of the agricultural workforce, and female-headed households, representing a quarter of the population in Northeast Syria¹³. According to CARE's Rapid Gender Assessments (RGA), water crisis has a compounded impact on women and girls' menstrual hygiene, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and access to clean and safe latrines and bathing sites¹⁴. The study participants also highlighted that water and energy constraints adding an extra burden to women's workload, since they spend more time performing time-consuming tasks of fetching water and using fuels. Furthermore, the study participant older women mentioned that their hygiene needs were not being met due to the lack of access to clean water which negatively affects their health and overall well-being.

In the absence of formal banking and financial institutions, **wheat value chain stakeholders particularly women find it very difficult to mobilize capital** for acquiring high quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, upgrading machinery, and shifting to solar energy. Women respondents emphasized that they do not have access to funding schemes except for the cases when they are specifically targeted by NGO projects. The study participants mentioned that they do not borrow cash, they purchase inputs on credit from traders with a grace period of several months, which involves an embedded interest ranging between 30-70 percent. It was also revealed that purchasing inputs on credit and dealing with traders is a 'man's job' and women rarely participate in this process, except in female-headed households. Most wheat producers expressed concerns that purchasing input on credit negatively impacts them, as interest rates can reach up to 70 percent, and they typically pay their accumulated dues in dollars. Limited access to finance remains one of the major constraints to wheat producers particularly for female-headed households which undermine their productive and entrepreneurial potential.

"Sometimes we lose everything in a bad harvest season because we have to repay our debts with double interest to traders."
Male FGD participant in Areesha

Access to networks and markets remains particularly limited for women, due to restrictive gender norms, mobility barriers and transportation constraints. Focus group participant farmers (both female and male) mentioned that they have joined agricultural committees supported by CARE Syria in Areesha and Hadadya. Apart from this, they have no access to any sectoral associations and women's network or saving groups. Both women and men producers emphasized the importance of networks in gaining access to technical know-how, knowledge, and new information. Regarding access to markets, large producers sell wheat grains to DAANES, while small producers sell it to traders at farm gates. One of the major problems related to the sale of wheat identified by participants was the issues with transportation. The study participants highlighted that, due to high

¹³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Water Crisis in Northern and Northeast Syria - Immediate Response and Funding Requirements. Available: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/water_crisis_response_plan-september_2021.pdf

¹⁴ CARE Syria. Rapid Gender Analysis- Whole of Syria (2022). Available: https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Rapid%20Gender%20Analysis_Syria_Whole%20country.pdf

transportation costs associated with delivering wheat grains to DAANES delivery points, along with delays and waiting periods, they prefer to sell wheat grains directly to traders at lower prices. It was also noted that men are expected to be involved in business dealings with traders and women is absent in this process.

Access to livelihoods opportunities is not same for women and men value chain stakeholders in Hadadya and Areesha communities. The study found that in addition to wheat production activities, women are involved in agricultural wage labor, engaging in activities such as planting vegetables, weeding, and harvesting cotton on nearby farms. When asked about appropriate professional occupations for women and men, the participants supported women's engagement in tailoring, livestock production, and subsistence farming, and men's involvement in construction, mechanization services, and trading. Male and Female youth narratives showed that they strongly share widely prevailing gender stereotypes about what is considered appropriate for women and men. Female youth affirmed that they see themselves involved in tailoring, sweets-making, and hairdressing, which are considered suitable for women. Female participants also highlighted that young girls' access to education and income-generating opportunities depends on the approval of their husbands or families. As a result, young girls often turn to home-based jobs, such as tailoring, to avoid family tensions. The study participants, including caregivers, mentioned that people with disabilities continue to face stigma, discrimination and isolation when trying to find a job. They often end up serving as helpers in family farming and rarely find jobs outside the home. KI from local disability rights organization highlighted that the private sector is reluctant to provide employment opportunities to PWD due to a lack of knowledge about the disability, prejudices and cost-related apprehensions.



Women SMEs participating in entrepreneurial skills development training at Areesha training center supported by CARE through Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) project.

Domain of Inquiry IV: Participation in the chain:

The traditional gender division of roles and responsibilities influence the participation of women and men in wheat value chain activities. This division determines which activities are performed by women and men along the chain, and the resources and opportunities available to them. While women are predominantly involved in labor-intensive activities such as manual planting, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, men are usually involved in value chain activities which require technology and machinery. Women also have less access to irrigation, pesticides, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs and labor-saving technologies, because men are regarded as decision-makers and responsible for dealing with service providers. It is critical to increase the visibility of women's productive role in the wheat value chain to ensure that they are considered legitimate value chain actors and gain access to resources and services.

- **Production** – Women perform many activities at production stage such as planting wheat, weeding, fertilizing, and harvesting. Women also play a significant role in post-harvest handling which include cleaning storage places, filling bags with harvested wheat bags and assisting in transportation. Men are more involved in mechanizing related tasks (e.g. land preparation, wheat seed sowing) purchasing seeds and inputs, and dealing with transportation.

The study found that both men and women face various challenges at production stage including limited access to finance, the hyperinflation of agricultural inputs, lack of access to certified wheat seeds, testing laboratories and storage facilities, water and energy constraints. In addition to that, women experience gender-based constraints (GBCs) in their access to resources and services, agricultural land and larger assets, markets and farmer's networks, value chain governance and decision-making due to restrictive gender norms, mobility, transportation and time constraints.

Furthermore, women wheat producers lack knowledge on conservation agriculture and climate-smart practices (e.g. pesticide use, water harvesting, composting and manure management, no-tillage methods for sowing wheat, barley) and access to mechanization and labor-saving technologies (e.g. mini-tiller, reaper/harvester, mobile threshers lighter and easier to maneuver). Limited access to labor-saving technologies has a direct impact on women's health, time-use and overall well-being. Women often bear the burden of physically demanding tasks, such as carrying heavy loads over long distances and operating inadequately designed machinery risking their health and safety. The barriers mentioned above prevent women to improve production and shift from production to a different node of the value chain.

The study found that youth participation in wheat production activities follows the pattern of the gendered division of labour. While female youth help their mothers with house chores, animal care and harvesting, male youth are mostly involved in irrigation and mechanization related activities. The

participation of people with disabilities in labor-intensive activities remains minimal. It was reported that individuals with mild impairments are often involved as helpers or contributing to family members in value chain activities while people living with severe physical, visual and other impairments most often do not participate in value chain activities depending on the nature and severity of disabilities

- **Collection** –The study found that men are involved in collection and transportation of wheat grain to delivery facilities, public and private mills and bakeries. Female participants raised concerns about gender-based constraints (GBCs) they experience when dealing with collectors. Traders and collectors, who are predominantly men, often refuse to negotiate with women producers, which is particularly challenging for female-headed households.

The KIIs with collectors and traders highlighted that they face the challenges in securing local wheat grains, primarily because farmers are selling it to DAANES and the Government of Syria (GoS)¹⁵ centers as well. During focus group discussions, male participants emphasized that there are cases when they prefer to sell wheat to traders even at 10% lower prices due to logistical barriers, delays, and high transportation fees associated with DAANES-owned delivery centers. Furthermore, farmers mentioned that they are unable to keep wheat grain and sell their produce at higher prices during off-season due to inadequate storage facilities.

- **Processing** – Women are mostly involved in flour processing and baking at home, while also taking on various productive roles as workers at private bakeries.

The KIIs with private bakeries revealed that gender roles are clearly defined in the workforce. Female workers are responsible for bread packaging, while male workers operate machinery and handle the baking process. The KIIs also affirmed the gender gap in earnings by highlighting that female worker earns 50,000 SYP per day, whereas male workers make between 65,000 and 75,000 SYP per day due to the more responsibilities assigned to men. The narratives of KIIs supported gender stereotypes about which tasks women can and can't do, limiting their roles in certain activities. ***“We give more physically demanding tasks to men such as operating machinery that's why they earn more money than women.”*** Male owner of bakery chain in Al-Hasakeh city.

When asked about operational challenges, respondents highlighted a combination of issues, including water and energy constraints, a shortage of local wheat grains/flour, outdated machinery, fuel availability problems, high costs of generator maintenance, transportation

¹⁵ Referring to Government of Syria (GOS) led by Bashar al-Assad. Data collection was concluded before the overthrow of the Government of Syria by a coalition of armed opposition groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

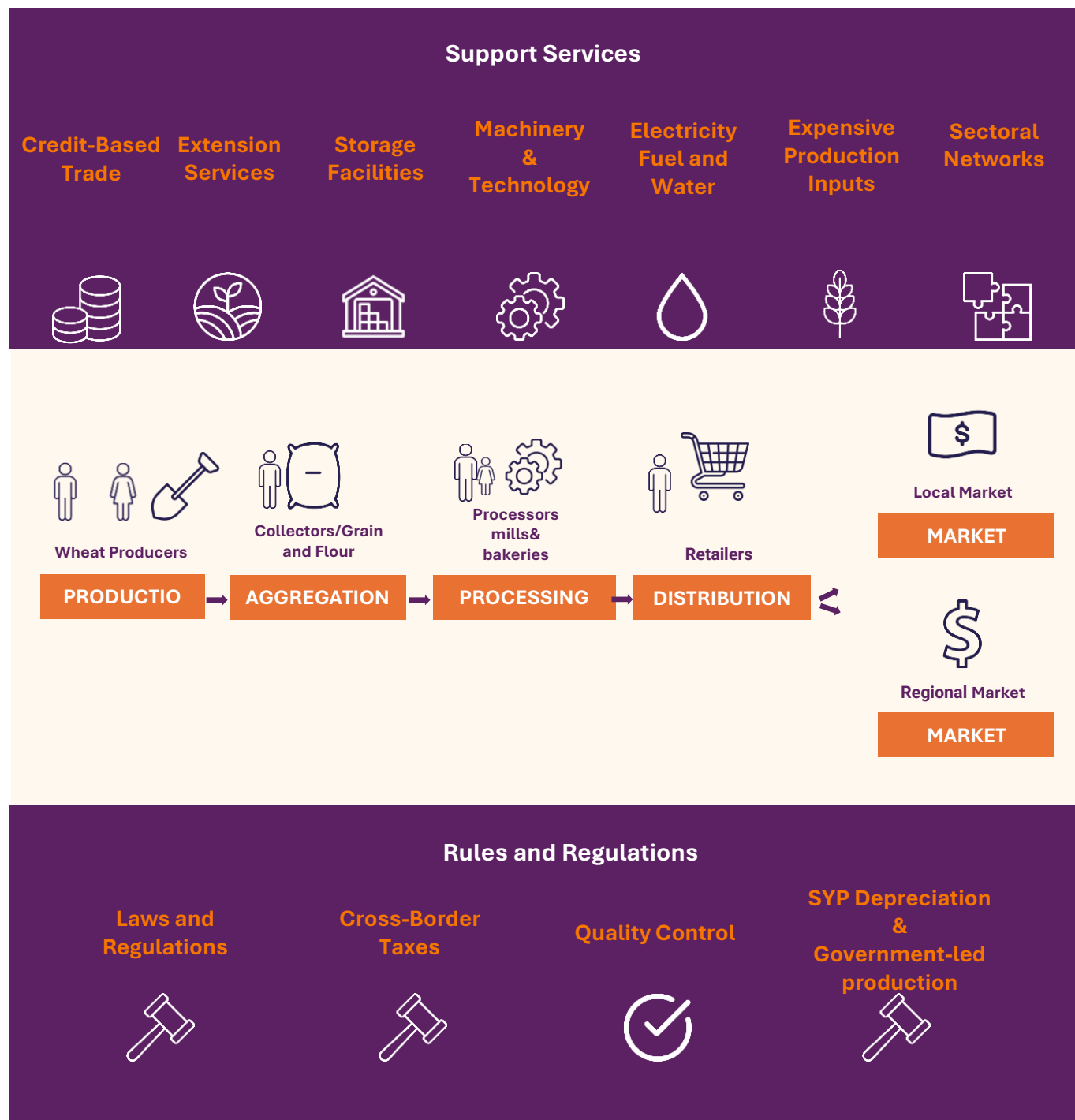
restrictions and custom fees. The processors seek financial support from the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria's (DAANES) and non-governmental actors to upgrade equipment through equipment financing programs or grants and address some of the above-mentioned barriers.

- **Trading-** The study found that women do not have opportunities to contribute to higher nodes of the value chain, including wheat-flour to bread trading.

Men are largely presented at trading level as wheat and flour retailers, importers, bakery owners. Women's role in trading is very limited due to restrictive gender norms, mobility, transportation and time constraints and other systemic barriers resulting from gender-based discrimination. Focus group participants emphasized that men are expected to lead price negotiation and business dealings in trading leaving no space for women's engagement in this process. Therefore, it remains very challenging for female-headed households to prove themselves with traders and break existing power dynamics.



Figure 3: A Gender-Sensitive Mapping of Wheat Value Chain:



The mapping shows that participation of women and girls, youth and the disadvantaged groups in value chain governance, farmers' groups, cooperatives remain limited. Most of the female respondents mentioned that they have no access to sector-specific associations, farmer's groups and cooperatives, except the cases of recently established farmer's committees supported by CARE Syria in Areesha and Hadadya sub-districts. The study also found that older men often serve as chairs of farmers' committees, while older women participate as members and rarely access to leadership positions. Their participation often depends on external support, typically provided through NGO projects targeting women and the disadvantaged groups. KIs with the agricultural department of DAANES revealed that they only provide specialized support including input subsidies (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, fuel) and technical assistance to the licensed agrarian associations and landowners.

"In most of cases women are busy with house chores and unable to attend the meetings, trainings and social gatherings"
FGD participant female youth, Hadadya

The study found that many unlicensed women and men producers participate in wheat value chain as stakeholders, but they have no access to cooperatives and consequently they are excluded from government subsidies. The assessment suggests that it is critical to support formalization of unlicensed small-scale producers particularly women, youth through cooperative approach. Improving women's participation in farmer's networks, cooperatives, support services can play a critical role in facilitating their access to resources, services and decision-making. At the same time, strengthening the capacities of service providers to operate in a more gender-responsive way is essential to ensure that women have access to technical information, knowledge and practices.



Domain of Inquiry V: Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Harmful Practices:

CARE's Formative Research for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) pilot shows that violence, particularly gender-based violence (GBV), remains a major barrier to equitable economic and social participation of women and girls in Northeast Syria (NES). Rooted in traditional gender norms, women and girls experience various forms of GBV including sexual, emotional, physical and economic violence.

When asked about common forms of GBV, female participants acknowledged the prevalence of verbal and economic violence, whereas male participants denied the existence of GBV in the community. Regarding child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), both female and male participants

mentioned that this practice is changing, with girls and boys now having greater autonomy to decide when and whom to marry.

“It is still considered normal for girls to get married at the age of 14 or 15 due to our local customs. Now, girls have more freedom to make decisions about their own lives”
FGD participant female, Areesha

Female and male participants both noted that over the past five years, GBV cases have decreased due to the community awareness raising campaigns organized by DAANES. Young girls emphasized the importance of the women’s committee which operates under DAANES and addresses women’s organizational matters within its institutions. The respondents

mentioned that the women’s committee provides community awareness sessions about GBV issues and protection mechanisms in Areesha and Hadadya communities. Moreover, the committee has a Congra Star, a special team supporting GBV survivors. The Women’s Committee representatives confirmed the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), physical, economic, physiological and other forms of violence in Areesha and Hadadya communities. They emphasized the importance of engaging men and boys in sensitization programs and noted the high attendance at community meetings, where both women and men participate to discuss GBV issues, including child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), polygamy, and domestic violence. The KIs from the women’s committee highlighted a need to develop their capacities in establishing effective reporting mechanisms, case management, adding new topics in community sensitization programs, promoting greater engagement of men and boys.

According to CARE’s VAWG Formative Research, women and girls continue to face various forms of violence including physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence in Areesha and Hadadya communities. GBV cases most often go unreported, due to the lack of adequate legal framework and support services. For example, Syrian law defines domestic violence as ‘hitting and harming’ and do not address the issues of marital rapes and therefore cases of rape, sexual abuse and other forms of violence goes unreported. This research also highlights the need to amend the existing legal framework to address violence against women and girls. Additionally, lack of shelters, psychological support, safety and legal services remain critical issues¹⁶. The analysis suggests that strengthening the roles and functions of the women’s committee on addressing protection needs of women and girls, improving access to support services for survivors, supporting community sensitization campaigns with engagement of men and boys and amendment of existing laws and policies should be key priorities.

¹⁶ CARE International – Syria. (2023). Formative Research for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) project.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The role and contribution of women to wheat sector remain invisible due to the gender division of labour along the chain and at the household level as well as prevailing gender-based constraints and discrimination they face in their access to resources and opportunities. As women are major players at the production level and men are largely presented in higher stages of value chain, economic opportunities and gains are not fairly distributed among women and men actors in the chain.

The study suggests that addressing the gender-based constraints women and the disadvantaged groups face in their access to productive resources and services, decision-making, entrepreneurial and income-generating activities is crucial to ensure that they are integrated into the market system. The study also emphasizes the need for increased visibility and recognition of women's contribution to the wheat value chain to ensure that women are considered legitimate value chain actors and gain access to the resources and services they need to engage in more productive value chain activities.

Based on the findings of in-depth gender analysis of wheat value chain in Areesha and Hadadya sub-districts, the following recommendations are proposed to the program team, policymakers and donor community to integrate gender-responsive solutions in value chain interventions.



Vocational training graduates from Areesha supported by CARE through Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) project

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED CONSTRAINTS (GBCS)

PRODUCTION

Limited ownership and control over productive assets (land, livestock, machinery etc.)

Improve women's control over household land and other assets by raising awareness on women's property rights and promoting joint ownership through "family farming approach" (**CARE BLRS/ DAANES Women's Committee**).

This includes development of advocacy and awareness-raising strategies on women's property rights, joint land titling between husband and wife, or fostering equal decision-making on the use of land and other household assets in collaboration with the Women's Committee. The interventions may foresee awareness-raising sessions with rural community on women's property rights, existing legislation and legal assistance, and the importance of joint land titling in family farming. Additionally, engaging community and religious leaders in community dialogues to promote women property rights can be helpful to shift discriminatory customary practices. It is also crucial to sensitize DAANES officials and policymakers with decision making power over land distribution and registration to protect and promote women's rights to land.

High prices and limited access to production inputs (seeds, fertilizers and pesticides)

Support women farmers to access to high quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs through direct distribution as well as reformulation of requisites to access to production inputs including the need to have land registered in one's name (**CARE BLRS/DAANES**).

The interventions may include reformulation of requisites for increasing women's access to production inputs and facilitate direct distribution of high-quality inputs to women farmers particularly those without formal land ownership. Additionally, supporting representation of women and men farmers from farmer's committees in policy dialogue with DAANES is crucial to advocate for the development of inclusive subsidy distribution policy leaving no one behind.

Limited Access to labour-saving technologies and excessive workload

Support women value chain actors to improve access to labour-saving technologies such as mini-tiller, reaper/harvester, mobile threshers which are easier to maneuver and might reduce their work burden (**CARE BLRS/INGOs/CSOs/DAANES/Private Sector**).

This include providing labour-saving machinery to women producers which will reduce their workload and time use, organizing awareness-raising sessions with rural women, officials from DAANES, private sector on the importance of labor-saving technologies on women's health, time-use and productivity. Additionally, organizing mechanization field days can be helpful to promote specialized labour-saving technologies in partnership with the private sector, DAANES and NGOs.

Limited access to information, training and technical know-how

Design and implement **women-targeted capacity development program** on conservation agriculture and climate-smart practices (**CARE BLRS**).

It is critically important to provide continuous technical support and training to women producers who have limited access to technical know-how and information. Enhancing women's technical skills and knowledge will not only boost their productivity but also promote greater adoption of climate smart practices and sustainable food production. The design of training programme should consider gender-specific data and be adapted to the unique needs of women including illiterate women, women with disabilities, younger and older women.

**Limited access to
farmer's networks,
value chain governance
and decision-making**

Facilitate women's access to agricultural cooperatives and farmers' networks to ensure that they are involved in value chain governance and decision-making processes (**CARE BLRS**).

It is important to facilitate women participation as members and chairpersons of cooperatives and farmers' committees to ensure that they have access to resources, opportunities and decision-making. The interventions may include reformulating membership policy and criteria of cooperatives to ensure women including ones living with disabilities, illiterate women, divorced and widows and other marginalized women can become members and chairpersons. Additionally, providing training on gender-equitable principles of leadership and decision-making and introducing realistic quotas can be helpful to encourage women' leadership within cooperatives and farmer's committees.

**Lack of adequate
Storage Facilities**

Support establishment of storage facilities which can benefit all categories of farmers and deliver wider range of services in Areesha and Hadadya (**CARE BLRS**).

This include establishing community-based storage facilities that is critically important for wheat producers to reduce post-harvest losses and engage in value addition. Support should be designed in a way that allows all categories of farmers to effectively access to the services for instance by developing preferential terms for female headed households, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups to access storage facilities.

Water and Energy Constrains

Support wheat producers particularly women to address water and energy constrains through **introducing new irrigation and sustainable energy solutions (solar power, adequate irrigation systems) (CARE/NGOs)**.

It is essential to support solarization and effective water usage interventions to address existing water and energy constrains undermining the productivity of value chain actors. The interventions may foresee solarization of boreholes, providing solar panels to women led businesses as well as providing irrigation kits and training on water smart agricultural practices, to farmer's committees and women SMEs.

TRANSPORTATION & COLLECTION

Heavy physical work
conflicting with
women's household
responsibilities

Mobility and time
constraints

High Transportation
Costs

Provide specialized transport to wheat cooperatives to serve its members particularly women and other producers who face transportation constraints (**CARE BLRS**).

Wheat producers particularly women have limited access to the means of transportation, including trucks, and as a result, they mostly sell their produce at lower prices at the farm gate. Therefore, it is essential to provide specialized transport to the farmer's committees to serve its members and non-members particularly women and other disadvantaged groups.

PROCESSING

**Limited local supply
and high prices of wheat
grains and flour**

Support local wheat production by providing material and technical support to wheat cooperatives and its members (**CARE BLRS**).

The interventions include providing high -quality certified seeds and technical assistance to wheat cooperatives to preserve Syria's endemic wheat varieties and improve yields. Additionally, establishment of demonstration plots with wheat cooperatives can be helpful to showcase improved performance of local varieties. Facilitating market linkages between producers and processors is crucial to address existing market gaps and promote traditional bread-making.

**Absence of reliable
energy source**

High price of fuel

Provide support to women SMEs, wheat cooperatives, individual processors to shift to renewable energy sources (**CARE BLRS**). This may include distribution of solar panels to women SMEs, processors, cooperative members to overcome energy constraints and engage in value addition.

**Lack of access to capital
and control over
household resources to
invest in expanding
business activity to
formal processing level**

Provide financial and technical support to Women SMEs operating in informal processing and assist them in expanding and formalize their business activity (**CARE BLRS**). Support may include business development grants and customized mentorship for women SMEs engaged in value addition. Through mentoring, entrepreneurs will improve their business plan, marketing strategy and receive technical support from sector specific mentors for the proper implementation of the approved investments.

Strengthen women's access to finance through **establishment of CARE's Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs)** in Areesha and Hadadya communities (**CARE BLRS**). This includes introduction of VSLA methodology with women SMEs and provision of necessary material and technical support to facilitate formation of VSLA groups. This may involve continuous capacity support for VSLA members to learn the basics of group formation, concepts of saving and borrowing, financial management and life skills.

TRADING

Lack of access to support services and networks and limited entrepreneurial opportunities

Support women's involvement in trading through cooperative approach to ensure that they have access to resources, networks, market information and support services (**CARE BLRS**).

It is affirmed that agricultural cooperatives and business networks provide a platform for improving women's access to market information, services and resources. It is essential to ensure women SMEs and producers are specifically targeted to ensure their participation in cooperatives, sectoral groups and business networks as a way to facilitate greater access to information, markets and opportunities.

Limited access to finance

Ensure that women have greater access to finance to enable them to establish businesses in retailing (**CARE BLRS**). This involves provision of business grants to women value chain actors involved in male dominated sphere such as trading to promote women's presence in profitable activities specifically at trading stage.

Limited knowledge of marketing and branding

Provide training on marketing and branding to individual processors, women SMEs to strengthen the competitiveness in local market (**CARE BLRS**). The interventions include training and mentorship support for women processors to improve business marketing strategy and branding. This will help them to understand consumer preferences and develop marketing and branding strategy to outcompete the market.

Limited access to productive markets

Support members of wheat cooperatives, women small-scale processors to access to new markets by **improving product quality (CARE BLRS)**. Providing technical consultations and trainings to wheat cooperatives, women SMEs to improve product quality and engage in value addition is necessary for strengthening their competitiveness. This can be complemented by linking the processors to larger markets, trade fairs, networking events, and digital marketing platforms to expand their reach and visibility.

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT & SUPPORT SERVICES

Absence of enabling environment for equal participation of women, people with disabilities and youths

Build knowledge and competencies of support services including cooperative department, extension services and other key service providers to deliver gender-responsive services and affectively reach out women value chain actors (**CARE BLRS**). This includes provision of gender sensitization trainings to the service providers both public and private extension services and the tools for effective gender mainstreaming and social inclusion.

Conduct policy advocacy to ensure that sector-specific laws, regulations and policies are responsive to the needs of women and men, and the disadvantaged groups (**CARE BLRS/ Early Recovery Working Group/Food Security and Livelihoods Working Group/NGOs**).

This includes development of joint advocacy initiatives to improve sector specific policies and strategies and support reformulation of eligibility criteria such as having land registered in one's name to ensure that all categories of farmers particularly women and other disadvantaged groups have access to subsidies. It is critical to increase internal capacities of the line ministries to institutionalize the concepts of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality in the training of their personnel, including policymakers. Additionally, it is essential to advocate for donors to support institutional capacity-building of DAANES in developing gender-responsive sector specific laws, policies, strategies.

Absence of enabling environment for equal participation of women, people with disabilities and youths

Strengthen capacity of the Women's Committee on GBV core concept mainstreaming, safe referral disclosure and reporting mechanisms, risk mitigation measures (**CARE VAWG**).

This will involve designing training programme on counselling, psychosocial first aid, and active listening for women's committee representative to provide empathetic and appropriate support to GBV survivors. Additionally, technical support will be provided to the Women's Committee to establish clear and accessible referral pathways, ensuring timely and effective service delivery. Moreover, role-playing exercises will be conducted to simulate disclosure and reporting scenarios in a safe environment, helping members strengthen their confidence and competence. Establishing continuous feedback loops is essential to enable committee members to share experiences, identify challenges, and inform future training sessions, ensuring ongoing improvements in risk mitigation and survivor support.

Strengthen the capacities of women-led organizations, women's rights organization, and disability rights organizations to better respond to the needs of women, girls, youth, and disadvantaged groups (**CARE BLRS**).

The local WLOs, WROs, disability right organizations continue to have capacity gaps in resource mobilization, policy advocacy, networking and gender transformative programming. Therefore, it is critical to strengthen local capacities to improve programming for women and girls, youth, PWD and other disadvantaged groups. Capacity support to WLOs, WROs and disability right organizations may include a series of trainings and knowledge transfer on gender transformative approaches (GTA), gender and disability rights advocacy, resource mobilization, CARE's globally well-tested approaches such as VSLAs, FFBS for women's economic empowerment. Additionally, expand partnership with local organizations that specialize in working with specific communities for instance PWD can be helpful for ensuring better outreach and programming for socially excluded groups.

Unequal gender relations within the household and along the chain

Continue engagement of men and boys in gender equality sensitization sessions, couple discussions and advocacy campaigns to address unequal power relations and ensure that women feel safe and supported to participate in economic and social activities (**CARE VAWG**). This involves engaging male gender champions, religious leaders, VAWG program participant couples from BLRS Phase I in wider community sensitization process such as awareness-raising trainings, couple discussions, advocacy campaigns to bring other men along as allies and make positive changes.

Support income diversification and off-farm employment for youth specifically young girls in non-traditional occupations to serve as role models for others (**CARE BLRS**). The interventions may foresee launching apprenticeship/ on-the-job training program for young women and men including youth living with disabilities with a particular focus on incentivizing young women to pursue more profitable livelihoods in non-traditional occupations. On the job-training through mentorship program can be instrumental in helping youth to access job opportunities and gain new skills. Moreover, provision of essential life skills such as communication, leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, and effective work habits which are highly demanded by employers can facilitate job placements.

Unequal participation and decision-making power

Support creation a network of local women leaders in collaboration with women's committee and local women organizations that can bring new connections, leadership and empowerment opportunities especially for marginalized women (**CARE BLRS**).

The interventions foresee the establishment of Women's Network to create a space for networking, peer to peer learning and knowledge sharing, advocacy, and women's collective voice and decision making. The first entry point will be the women lead farmers, women SMEs and women trainers/facilitators identified during BLRS phase I and through them, activate the network. Preparatory activities include capacity-building trainings to develop network members' leadership skills, public speaking abilities, and interpersonal skills enabling them to participate in network activities more effectively. Additionally, sectoral working groups may be established under the network to link network member entrepreneurs and large business owners for peer-to-peer support and mentorship, networking events and roundtables. Furthermore, Women' Network can provide valuable services—such as training, consultancy, technical know-how not only to their members but also to non-members and evolve into a self-sustaining platform for building collective dreams of local women and drive changes.

About CARE Syria

CARE has been working in Northeast Syria (NES) since 2017, reaching over 1,7 million conflict affected people. CARE's response in Syria includes life-saving emergency assistance to affected population, support for food security and the re-establishment of livelihoods.

Where possible, CARE helps rebuild livelihoods, developing resilience programs and providing families with early recovery support, including agricultural production, livestock programs, cash for work, microfinance, and concerted protection programming, including for violence against women and girls, case management, and psychosocial programming.

CARE has been a trusted leader in humanitarian assistance for 80 years, and we won't turn our backs on those in crisis. Every day, together with you, CARE saves lives and helps millions of people find the way to a better life worldwide.

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