



**Safeguarding Housing, Land, and Property Rights  
of Syria Refugees and Internally Displaced People – HLP II**

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Application for Gender competition

**GIZ’s Gender Award 2024!**

**Unlocking Equality: Paving the Way for Syrian Women's HLP Rights**  
The Network of Syrian Women HLP Experts and Practitioners

**GIZ Syria Portfolio**

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## Context

As a result of the Syria conflict more than 13.4 million Syrians (about 61.8% of the country's pre-war population as of March 2021) have fled their homes. More than 6.7 million of them live as refugees in the neighboring countries of Syria, and more than 6.7 million people are internally displaced. At least 50% of the refugees and 70% of the IDPs are women. Return intentions surveys showed that most of those hope to return home one day despite the current challenges in Syria. One main obstacle would be the lack of adequate housing and violations committed against their housing, land, and property rights. Women would suffer most as they have been historically deprived from their HLP rights.

Even before the conflict in Syria, women faced disadvantages in securing Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights. Less than 5 % of women have their names as owners of lands on land registry records. Their access to HLP, primarily through inheritance or marriage, was constrained by societal norms, especially in cases of marriages to foreigners, polygamous unions, or informal arrangements. Legal discrepancies and flaws added further obstacles, particularly for displaced women. The conflict-induced displacement exacerbates these challenges, leaving women as heads of households without secure tenure, increasing vulnerability to forced evictions and property dispossession. The breakdown of legal structures during the conflict heightens the risk of exploitation, displacement, and violence against women.

Urban policies and HLP laws across all areas of Syria directly contribute to women's unequal access to HLP rights. This is particularly true when looking at inheritance regulations but is also the result of other discriminatory laws that affect women's ability to access compensation or alternative housing, such as problems accessing documentation and nationality for their children that many women face. There has been no effort across the different regions to ensure gender mainstreaming in the development of urban policies and initiatives.

Across all regions in Syria, discriminatory customs and traditions have long been used to deny women their inheritance rights. Examples are challenges that begin at the start of the process - where few women will even have housing or land registered under their name to various restrictions on women in accessing courts, such as reprisals from family members.

The protection needs of women who try to take measures to access their HLP rights often place vulnerabilities on them. This is especially true when they are displaced, or when they are part of female headed households.

### **Additional conflict- related challenges faced by women accessing their HLP rights<sup>1</sup>**

In the context of the protracted conflict in Syria, accessing housing and asserting ownership over property has proven to be a multifaceted challenge for women, with specific and heightened difficulties faced by tens of thousands of widows and wives of those detained, disappeared, or missing, who now find themselves heading households across the nation. The barriers to women's access to housing are deeply entrenched in both legal and societal challenges. Even

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/06/gendered-impact-conflict-syrian-arab-republic-women-and-girls>

before the conflict, as few as two to five percent of women in Syria owned residential property, a statistic influenced by cultural norms, legal intricacies, and traditional gender roles. Husbands were traditionally expected to be the providers of family housing, leaving women dependent on male relatives or spouses for property access. However, the conflict has disrupted this dynamic, leaving an increasing number of widows and women heading households without this traditional support system, rendering them particularly vulnerable to the loss of housing.

A critical aspect of the challenges faced by women in Syria is the gender disparities inherent in inheritance laws. For most Syrians, inheritance is distributed unequally between male and female heirs, with daughters entitled to only half the inheritance of sons. This disparity is even more pronounced for widows with sons, who are entitled to just 1/8 of their deceased husband's inheritance, and they are not guaranteed the right to continue residing in a house owned by the deceased spouse. Cultural norms further compound the issue, with housing traditionally inherited from fathers to sons, leaving women at a disadvantage in claiming residential property. The pressure from male family members for women not to claim their entitlements under inheritance laws and the associated societal shame has led many women to forego their rightful inheritance, perpetuating gender inequalities in property ownership.

Specific challenges emerge for widows and wives of the disappeared, presenting diverse and profound difficulties related to housing and property. Many of these women risk not obtaining their share of the inheritance, including property shares unless their missing husbands are declared dead. However, many women are reluctant to proceed with such a declaration due to lingering hope and societal pressures. Those who do face harassment and threats when approaching government institutions, particularly if perceived as affiliated with the opposition. Instances of officials exploiting vulnerable women and demanding sexual favors in exchange for information about detained husbands, add an alarming dimension to the challenges faced by this already vulnerable group.

## **GIZ Project: Safeguarding Housing, Land, and Property Rights of Syrian Refugees and IDPs II**

The project works around 4 main outputs:

- 1- Consultative capacity of selected Syrian and international organizations to document HLP claims of Syrian refugees and IDPs has been expanded.
- 2- Scalable procedures for documenting, processing and securing HLP claims of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons are applied.
- 3- Strengthening the capacities of the existing HLP expert network
- 4- The processing of documented violations of legal norms and standards on HLP, which particularly affect vulnerable target groups, is improved.

During the implementation phase, the project team realized that it is very hard to achieve real impact when it comes to women's HLP rights; simply because 95% of landowners in Syria are men!!! Here are some examples:

- In cases where 50% of the beneficiaries of legal awareness sessions were women, yet;

they were unlikely to then ask for counselling as property in Syria is rarely in their names. Women refugees also frequently report a fear of retribution from their families if they step forward to protect and claim HLP rights.

- When it comes to safeguarding HLP documents and claims; usually this is by default a biased exercise since rarely any properties are registered under women's names. Yet, this is an essential step to protect women heirs and family members in the future. To overcome this obstacle, the projects open the opportunity to all household members to claim tenure rights even for those whose names do not appear on HLP documents.
- When establishing networks of expertise on HLP, the project realized that discussions are men dominant. It became very clear that it is important to establish spaces for women to discuss HLP issues from a gender perspective. This would be key to voice their needs and concerns in all project activities but also in addressing challenges on Women HLP rights in Syria.

### **The Network of Syrian Women HLP Experts and Practitioners**

Building upon the ongoing project's endeavors to address Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) challenges encountered by Syrian women refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the project took the initiative to establish a network of 25 Syrian women HLP experts and Practitioners. The network serves as a safe space for those women to come together, discuss HLP challenges faced by women refugees and IDPs, agree on strategies and plans to address these challenges; and to have a voice on the implementation of GIZ HLP project from a gender perspective.

This diverse group includes human rights activists, feminists, lawyers, urban planners, architects, and representatives of civil society organizations, all working collaboratively towards securing women's HLP rights in Syria.

GIZ Project has committed resources for this network to meet, grow, work jointly, learn together, build their capacities, and most importantly to be able to implement relevant initiatives.

### **Representation, Rights, Resources**

During its first meeting, the network decided to shape their voices in a strategy paper putting forward strategies and recommendations to address women's HLP rights in Syria. They wanted this paper to their voices and expertise as Syrian women seeking to secure HLP rights for all women in Syria. The Network is committed to utilizing the information made available in the paper, to finding creative ways to address these challenges. They have initiated this research to fill the gap in focus on women's rights in HLP and have engaged heavily in the development and improvement of the research strategy, revising the different versions of the paper.

The Network wanted to put forward strategies and recommendations to guide them as group first of all including the different women led CSOs/ NGOs members of the group; and to guide the GIZ project and other stakeholders, to plan its interventions supporting women's HLP rights in Syria.

GIZ project will use this paper to plan its future activities to be oriented towards gender transformative approaches. It will allocate resources to support the group to implement certain activities in line with the recommendations.

The strategy paper accentuates that women accessing their full rights is foundational to any processes that incorporate social justice. It highlights how ensuring Syrian women are able to exercise their full HLP rights is critical to their immediate humanitarian and human rights needs, to achieving durable solutions and to ensuring any future smooth transitional justice processes and sustainable peace in Syria.

### **Gender competition 2024**

GIZ HLP project is applying to the Gender Competition on behalf of this Network of 25 Syrian women and their amazing work and commitment developing the strategy paper. Should this application be selected, the prize will be dedicated to support one small initiative by the women's network aiming to contribute to securing women's HLP rights in Syria.