

Key findings

Gender analysis of the earthquake impact in northwestern Syria

A series of major earthquakes struck northern Syria and southern Türkiye on 6 February 2023, compounding the already dire living conditions for millions of people affected by poverty and protracted conflict. Given the mounting [global evidence](#) that women, men, girls, boys, and other vulnerable groups experience disasters differently, UN Women set out to assess the gendered humanitarian impacts in northwestern Syria, coping mechanisms, gender roles, ownership and decision-making.

The resulting *Gender Analysis of the Syria Earthquake Response*, uses quantitative and qualitative data, including a survey of 800 household members from impacted populations in northwestern Syria.

It also draws on key informant interviews with service-providers, women's rights organizations and experts, in-depth interviews with impacted household members, and focus group discussions with 47 women and 28 men in affected areas. The assessment is equally informed by existing literature on gendered power dynamics, social norms and practices, as well as by other post-earthquake assessments. This gender analysis takes an intersectional approach, considering disability, age, displacement and other variables.

During times of disaster, UN Women's core mission is to promote gender equality and safeguard the rights of women and girls by fully integrating their needs, rights, and perspectives in all aspects of the response. This includes ensuring that women and girls have equal access to basic services, such as health care and education, and that their protection and safety are prioritized. UN Women also works to support women's leadership and participation in decision-making related to humanitarian action.

Key findings:

The gender analysis confirmed that earthquakes did have a gendered impact on men, women, boys, and girls. This is evidenced by the disparities observed in various areas of the aftermath, highlighting the unique challenges faced by different genders. Deaths, injuries and disabilities have disproportionately affected the population, with a significant number of casualties reported.

Escalating vulnerabilities and challenges faced by female-headed households: The loss of fathers has resulted in an increase in female-headed households from

14% to 18.4%, which now face additional responsibilities and exacerbate vulnerabilities. These households now shoulder additional responsibilities, discrimination, and face heightened vulnerabilities. Significantly, a larger proportion of female-headed households (38%) report full damage to their homes caused by the earthquake. Furthermore, access to food items has seen a steeper decline in female-headed households (54%). The impact on households with disabilities has also escalated, further straining their already challenging circumstances.

The earthquake has left a significant portion of the population in need of assistance, particularly in northwestern Syria, in need of immediate support. While females comprise a slightly higher percentage of the impacted population, children under the age of 15 make up a significant portion of the population and have been profoundly affected. The damage to homes has been substantial, with a considerable number of

households reporting complete or partial destruction. Female-headed households bear a heavier burden, as they are more likely to experience full damage to their homes.

Displacement: The total population of northwestern Syria is roughly 4.5 million, with 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other refugees, such as Palestinians and Iraqis, that were already residing in camps. The earthquakes forced 34% of the surveyed population to move into a community other than where they lived before, again with more female-than-male-headed households being newly displaced (39% vs. 34%). Key informants cite risks for the displaced, such as higher levels of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and violence against children detected, in new camps as well as old ones. This is due to overcrowding, a lack of lighting, and women and children having to walk at night to reach water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Safety and protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse: An alarming increase in gender-based violence, both within households and communities, necessitates urgent action to protect the rights and safety of women and children. According to data analysis, 73% of females report that violence at home has either increased or remained the same compared to before. Additionally, 70% of females indicate that community violence against women has increased or remained the same since the earthquake. Similar trends are observed in reporting violence against female children. These findings are further supported by responses regarding personal safety. An astonishing 82% of females express that they have felt a deterioration in their safety at home, while 70% have felt less safe walking around the community. Harmful coping strategies, such as child labor and child marriage, have witnessed a surge since the earthquake, endangering the well-being and prospects of young individuals.



*Photo: AWRAD/UN Women
Jandairis, 61, widowed and internally displaced person, lives with her son and his wife. They lost their house after the earthquake. The family of three have been relocated and now live in a tent in the same region.*

Loss of income and employment: Women are 3.4 times more likely than men to own or run a home-based business, highlighting the vulnerability of women's economic activities to the earthquake's effects. The loss of informal activities is twice as high among female-headed households compared to male-headed households. Two-thirds of females report a decrease in their employment opportunities following the earthquake. These figures were even higher among the displaced population.

Challenges accessing essential services:

The earthquake in northwest Syria has had severe implications for access to essential services. Clean water and sanitation have become urgent concerns, with a significant shortage reported for personal hygiene, particularly affecting female-headed households. Moreover, female-headed households face a higher rate of shortages in personal care and hygiene products compared to male-headed households (80% of female heads of household compared to 61% of male heads of households).

Food security has also been greatly impacted, with a substantial number of people now facing food insecurity, particularly in female-headed households (54% of female-headed households compared to 45% of male-headed households).

Displaced populations and households with elderly individuals, those aged 18-35, and individuals with disabilities are especially vulnerable to reduced access to food.

Access to health services has become more challenging for female-headed households, including higher difficulties in securing transportation and affordability of services.

Primary and reproductive health services are particularly affected, with a decline in access reported by female-headed households, IDPs, and pregnant or lactating women. Three-quarters (76%) of pregnant women report negative impacts on their access to prenatal health services, while 82% of lactating women report a negative impact on their postnatal services.

Urgent efforts are needed to address these critical gaps in essential services to ensure the well-being and rights of all affected populations.

Decision-making: The largest decrease in household decision-making capacity is experienced by females in male-headed households. Additionally, after the earthquake, only 43% of female-headed households report that the decision-making capacity of females remained unchanged. Male-headed households are less impacted by the earthquake in terms of the decision-making dynamics within the household compared to female-headed households. The most significant decrease in decision-making capacity is observed among females in non-internally displaced person (IDP) households, followed by females in households displaced from outside the region.

Such data are key to understanding the influence of gender roles, power dynamics, and women and girls' roles in determining their experiences, coping strategies and needs during disasters, which is crucial to ensuring that the humanitarian post-earthquake response is equitable and gender responsive. Many women and girls volunteered as part of the humanitarian actions after the earthquake, such as rescue work, providing medical care, trauma counseling and community education to help families, women, and children to recover afterward. Nonetheless, the voices of women and women's groups are not sufficiently or systematically integrated into community, government and international decision-making spaces and processes.

Key recommendations to all donors, humanitarian leaders and actors include:

To ensure an inclusive and equitable post-earthquake response, it is crucial to prioritize the immediate needs of women, men, girls and boys, particularly those from vulnerable groups, to prevent further exacerbation of their vulnerabilities. By focusing on meeting their needs and ensuring access to essential services, in particular protection and support, humanitarian actors can effectively mitigate the immediate impacts of the earthquake and contribute to their overall well-being. Adopting a gender-responsive approach to delivering assistance is essential, tailoring it to the diverse needs and experiences of individuals, and addressing the specific challenges faced by these vulnerable groups.

In the longer term, during the recovery phase, humanitarian actors should be sure to adopt a transformative approach to address the underlying root causes of gender inequalities. This requires challenging social norms, discriminatory practices and unequal power relations that perpetuate gender disparities. Investments in programmes and interventions that promote women's empowerment, gender equality and the advancement of women's rights must be prioritized. This includes supporting initiatives that challenge and transform discriminatory social norms, power imbalances and unequal gender dynamics.

Further investments in integrating gender aspects into sectoral assessments and conducting gender and intersectional analysis are crucial. The evidence and recommendations generated from such analysis must be effectively utilized to inform the design of programming and policies. It is of paramount importance to support the collection of sex- and age-disaggregated data, as well as other relevant variables such as disability, education and displacement, which influence their vulnerabilities and experiences. This approach is essential to

ensure that humanitarian actors have a comprehensive understanding of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different groups, thereby facilitating targeted and inclusive interventions.

To achieve an inclusive and gender-responsive approach, it is crucial to adopt a participatory approach that actively engages women, men, girls, boys and other marginalized groups in the analysis, design and planning of all future responses. Their voices are essential for capturing their unique needs, experiences and specific challenges, both in the short term and the long term. By centring their perspectives and actively including them in decision-making processes, we can ensure that the response efforts effectively address their challenges and prioritize their overall well-being. This inclusive approach will contribute to more sustainable and equitable outcomes, fostering gender equality and empowerment for all individuals.

The crucial role that women-led and women's right organizations can play in the post-earthquake response must be recognized and acknowledged. It is essential to capitalize on their capacities and catalysts in all planning and response efforts, as their active engagement fills a recognized gap in the humanitarian response. By recognizing and amplifying their contributions, the post-earthquake response will ensure effective and inclusive actions from assessments through to recovery. This inclusive approach will empower these organizations to actively contribute their expertise and perspectives, resulting in more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes for all those affected by the earthquake.

Resource:

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