

Co-Presidency within the Autonomous Administration

As a Model for Women's Political Participation

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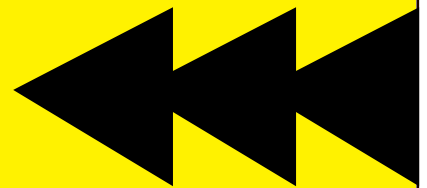
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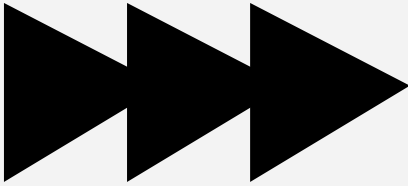


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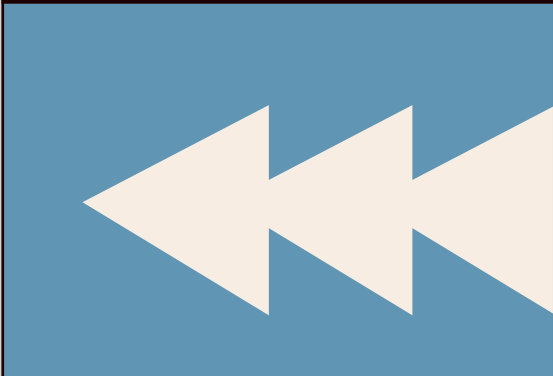
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Introduction and Summary

Throughout history, Syrian women have long struggled for a wider political presence, especially after the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011. They have faced difficulties achieving this aspiration, as they have been excluded from decision-making positions¹, even though they had been among the first participants in the demonstrations. Women and feminist organizations have also long struggled to achieve a quota of at least %30, and many of them have demanded effective access for women to decision-making positions.

As a result of the Syrian revolution, which turned into a destructive civil war, Syria has become subject to the control of various de facto forces². Each region is subject to the control of distinct authorities that receive support from different international factions. These different forces have implemented their own sets of laws and lifestyles, varying from one region to another. As such, the knowledge gap persists regarding the situation of women and their lives in these regions. This gap encompasses regional disparities regarding women's involvement in political and public spheres, and the barriers they encounter with regard to political participation in these areas.



¹Decision-making is the deliberations and the thought processes to reach the appropriate decision among several options, and decision-making hubs are the centers that make this selection and adopt of the appropriate decision.

²[خريطة السيطرة العسكرية في سورية نهاية 2022 وبداية 2023](#)

This research paper attempts

to fill this gap and increase knowledge on one of these different authorities within Syria and its impact on women's political participation. It takes as case-study the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which is controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and adopts a co-management system. In this system, a man and a woman hold the same administrative position, suggesting that women of this administration are decision-making partners. This raises several questions regarding the effectiveness and the reality of this system, and whether the women taking part in this system consider it as an opportunity for equal participation.

The significance

of this research paper lies in its examination of one aspect of women's political participation in Syria. It explores both the pros and cons of this experience and assesses the potential for transforming it into an exemplary model for the future Syria, addressing the gaps that need to be overcome and highlighting the essential positive aspects to consider. To gain comprehensive insights into the experiences of women participating in this co-management system, the research employed a qualitative methodology³, consisting of an exploratory phase involving in-depth interviews with three political activists and feminists to better understand the regional context, followed by a survey and focus group discussions.

The research revealed

that the co-presidency system is primarily applied to high-ranking and senior management roles. Although this system entails that a male president and female president be jointly involved in decision-making, it does not extend to all decision-making positions.

³Qualitative Research

The research findings suggest

that women's participation within the co-presidency system is superficial and lacks authenticity for several reasons. First, the input of participants shows that co-presidency within the Autonomous Administration is limited to senior and high-ranking positions and is not implemented across all levels, including non-political administrative positions. The results also indicate that co-presidency in the Autonomous Administration doesn't truly empower women as decision-makers. They often find themselves compelled to share the decision-making process with an often-dominant male counterpart, except in specific cases where women are ideologically aligned with senior decision-making cadres in North and East Syria. As a result, this system can be viewed as a means to bypass gender quotas, indicating that women's participation is not real and effective. Despite its distinctiveness from other governance models in Syria, this system operates in an environment lacking democracy. The ultimate decisions are still made top-down in the highest decision-making hubs of Northeastern Syria and are carried out through the co-presidency. Nevertheless, co-presidency still stands as a pioneering experience that should be leveraged and improved in order to achieve real and impactful women participation.

Background and Literature

Review

Women's Political Participation



Participation is a contribution to action and community engagement, as defined by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

It is «a way of work that recognizes and values community members as equal partners. It makes sure their opinions are heard and used to design and guide our work⁴.»

Throughout history, Syrian feminist and women's organizations have fought to secure women's participation in public life and politics. They championed the rights of women to vote and run as candidates in elections. Eventually, Syrian women gained the right to vote in 1949 and the right to stand as candidates in 1953⁵. However, this did not ensure women's representation in decision-making roles, which made it ever more significant to advocate for gender quotas. Quotas represent a form of positive discrimination aimed at supporting women to overcome barriers to their participation in political activities.

A women's quota entails reserving a minimum number of seats in elected councils or administrative and executive bodies for women.

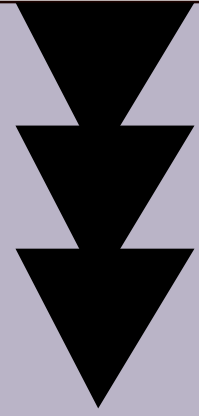
The goal is to enhance their representation in politics and include them in decision-making processes. In many quota systems, women are allocated a significant minority of seats, typically ranging from 20 to 30 percent of the total seats⁶.

⁴the official website of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

⁵Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region, United Nations, ESCWA, 2017, p. 9.

⁶Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES)



The current borders in the Middle East were established through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the former Ottoman Empire's territory after World War I. The Treaty of Lausanne later marked the end of an independent Kurdish entity, leading to the division of the Kurdish population across four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and parts of Northeastern Syria⁷.

Kurds in Syria endured significant persecution, particularly under governments with an Arab nationalist background.

One notable instance was their exclusion from Syrian citizenship during the 1962 Census, conducted under the presidency of Nazim al-Qudsi on October 5/1962.

This event led to the division of the Kurdish population in Syria into:

- Kurds with Syrian citizenship.
- Kurds stripped of citizenship and registered in official records as foreigners.
- Kurds deprived of their nationality who are not registered in the official civil status registers, and have been referred to as "Maktoum", a Syrian administrative term that refers to a person who is not registered in the official records⁸.

The displacement of Arab citizens from their lands as a result of the flooding during the construction of the Euphrates Dam added to the suffering of Syrian Kurds. Arab villages were relocated to areas previously inhabited by Kurds, and these newly settled Arab areas became known as the «Arab Belt.» This belt extended along approximately 300 kilometers in length and 15-10 kilometers in width, spanning from the Iraqi border in the east to Ras al-Ain in the west⁹.

⁷The historical background of the Syrian Kurdish issue

⁸Syria's Kurds

⁹Ibid.



After the Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria, and with its rule solidified after Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1973, the Kurds faced dual persecution. They were prohibited from using their native language, opening shops with Kurdish names, registering newborn children with Kurdish names, and using the Kurdish language in public gatherings and schools¹⁰.

Syria is home to various Kurdish parties, the most prominent being the Kurdish Democratic Party. This party emerged after the 2011 revolution through a coalition of parties within the Kurdish National Council. It aligned itself with the Syrian opposition, represented by the Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The Kurdish Democratic Party also holds allegiance to its Iraqi counterpart led by Barzani. Another noteworthy Kurdish party is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is affiliated with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), led by Ocalan. This party played a key role in the establishment of the current Autonomous Administration in Syria¹¹. Following the 2011 revolution against the Syrian regime, which escalated into a multifaceted civil, regional, and international conflict¹², the Northeastern region fell under the control of ISIS, a militant jihadist terrorist organization. ISIS established its own state with Raqqa as capital. The international community then waged a war against terrorism in Syria¹³, with the Democratic Union Party (PYD)¹⁴ serving as its ground

force. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) established the Autonomous Administration after the elimination of the ISIS statelet. This administration was founded in early 2014 and became an expression of the PYD's political program in 2018. Following the expulsion of the Islamic State, the Syrian Democratic Council, which represents the political space of the Syrian Democratic Forces, held meetings that did not include the Kurdish National Council. As a result of these meetings, they established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria¹⁵.

Despite the formation of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Council) by several Kurdish and Arab parties, the Autonomous Administration remained under the influence of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This was primarily due to the unique relationship and subordination of the PYD to the PKK. PKK members were strategically placed within civil offices and agencies, and were often referred to as «Kurds,» and once appointed, they wielded significant decision-making power¹⁶.

The control exerted by the PKK has generated tension in the region. Despite a relative easing of civil society movements, the current one-party governance approach within the Autonomous Administration, which has adopted policies reminiscent of past governments to manage regional tensions, has led to increased frustration among other components¹⁷.

¹⁰[Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government \(KRG\) in Iraq.](#)

¹¹[More than 30 parties make up the Kurdish political map in Syria](#)

¹²[The Syrian Crisis \(2011-2022\) and the Regional and International Conflict in the Region - A Study of Principals and Mechanisms of Conflict Management](#)

¹³[The Global Coalition Against ISIS | Home Page \(theglobalcoalition.org\)](#)

¹⁴[Syrian Kurds Position in the Coalition Against ISIS | Knowledge | Al Jazeera Net \(aljazeera.net\)](#)

¹⁵[Northeast Syria's Kurds: The Dynamics of Politics and Power](#)

¹⁶[Ibid.](#)

¹⁷[Northeast Syria's Kurds: The Dynamics of Politics and Power](#)

The Situation of Women Under the Autonomous Administration

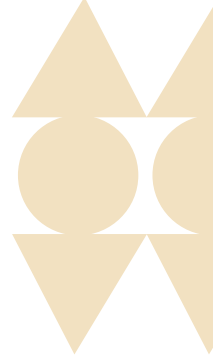


In the region governed by the Autonomous Administration, the PYD party, as previously mentioned, is in control. This party is closely affiliated with the PKK, led by Ocalan. Consequently, the prevailing ideology in the region is rooted in Ocalan's ideas and writings, collectively referred to as the «Manifesto.» Among Ocalan's contributions is the concept of «jineology,» a term derived from «jin,» meaning woman, and «logy,» which signifies science. Abdullah Ocalan, whom the party regards as its leader, introduced the 'science of women' in 2008 as a component of his advocacy for the sociology of freedom, which is based on the principles of an ecological and democratic society, as well as the freedom of both women and men¹⁸.

By adhering to this ideology, women were given a unique status within the Autonomous Administration region, setting them apart from women in other regions of Syria. Their participation in the public life emerged, be it in social, political, or military. It can be argued that no other group in the Middle East has a higher proportion of women in leadership positions¹⁹.

¹⁸ [Why Is the Science of Women \(Jineology\) Being Taught in Northeastern Syria?](#)

¹⁹ [How Kurdish Are Transforming and Democratising the Middle East.](#) Shilan Fuad Hussein



As Vladimir Fiorsky noted in his research for the Jusoor center, «Kurds are more tolerant of women than all Muslim peoples.²⁰»

The Kurds, in fact, shared similar views on women's rights with the region's peoples, given that the region had long been governed by tribal and religious laws rooted in notions of honor. These laws permitted forced and child marriages, domestic and sexual violence, polygamy, and other harmful customs²¹. The prevalent social norms and customs that govern Kurdish women in rural areas and small cities do not differ much from those in other social environments across the neighboring Syrian countryside when it comes to their religious or national diversity. In this context, the difference here refers to the stereotypical gender roles that persist under the same patriarchal system, regardless of superficial factors (like fashion choices, etc²²).

Historically, the political role of women in Kurdistan has closely mirrored that of women in Syria and the surrounding regions. In the realm of politics, Kurdish women, much like their counterparts across the Middle East, have largely been marginalized for decades in modern history. They haven't played a significant role, and their involvement has been primarily limited to isolated individual contributions²³.

Following the 2011 revolution, Syrian women,

including Kurdish women, became more involved in political activities compared to their activities pre-revolution. They began to play a more substantial political role across various newly established political entities, even in the face of attempts to exclude them and restrict their participation²⁴. In the initial stages of the revolution, women were actively engaged in demonstrations, relief work, and documentation and civil activities. Nevertheless, their participation waned as the revolution evolved into an armed conflict²⁵. Women's presence within Kurdish political formations varied significantly. While they encountered exclusion and limited representation in the Kurdish National Council, their participation in leadership roles within parties affiliated with the Council ranged from 1% to 10%²⁶. In contrast, their presence was more substantial within the Kurdistan Democratic Union Party (PYD) and within the Autonomous Administration. The PKK, to which the PYD is affiliated, has had a distinct experience regarding women's participation. Women's involvement has spanned a broad spectrum, encompassing various aspects, from political and organizational roles to military and security ones²⁷.

²⁰ [Jusoor, The Role of Women in the Kurdish Political Movement in Syria](#)

²¹ [Science of Women' Classes Take on the Patriarchy in Kurdish-Held Northeast Syria](#), Elizabeth Flock

²² [Sabiha Khalil, The reality of Syrian Kurdish women and the heresy of Abuji feminism](#)

²³ [Jusoor, The Role of Women in the Kurdish Political Movement in Syria](#)

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Lama Kannout, In the Core or on the Margin: Syrian Women's Political Participation, First Edition, 2017, p.31

²⁶ [Sabiha Khalil, The reality of Syrian Kurdish women and the heresy of Abuji feminism](#)

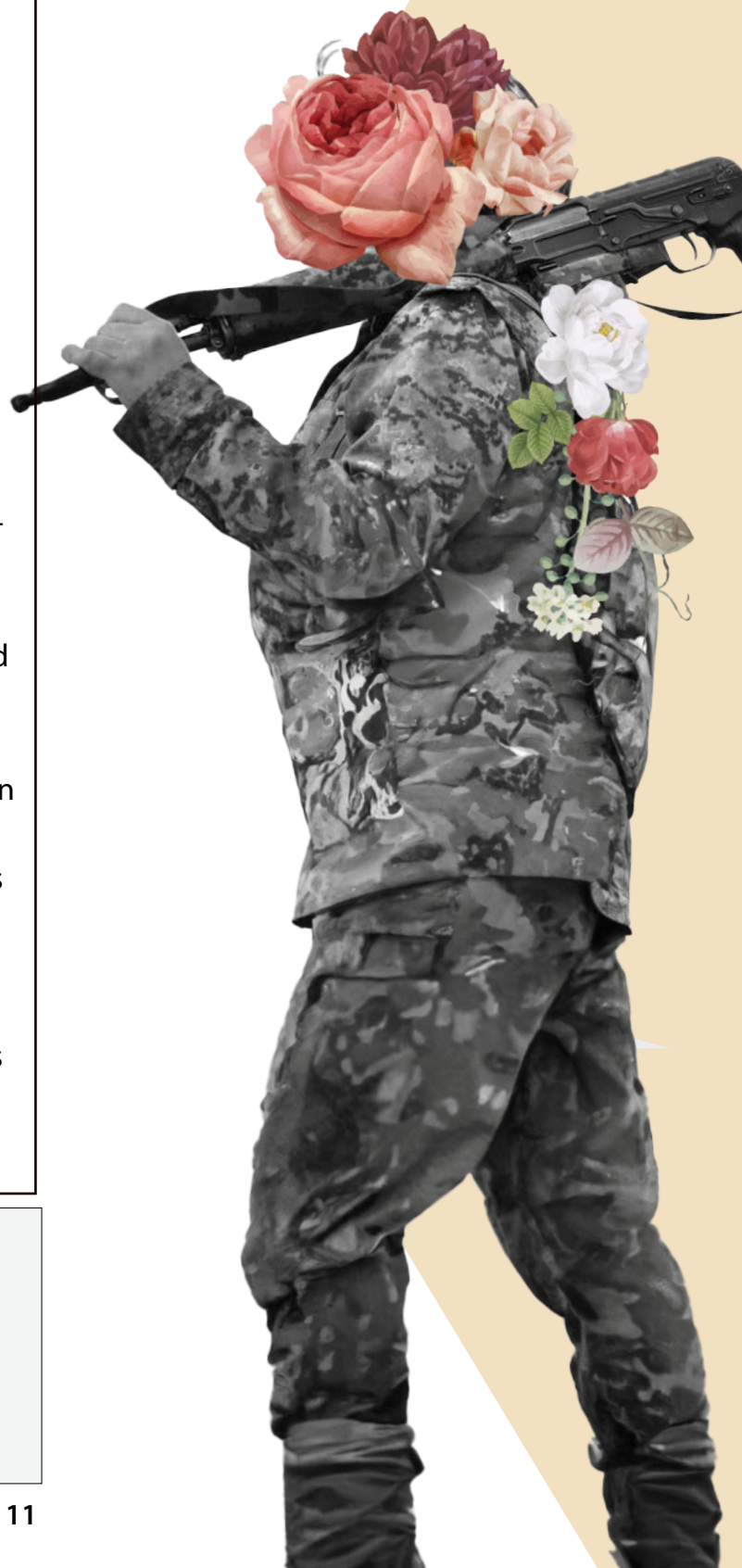
²⁷ [Jusoor, The Role of Women in the Kurdish Political Movement in Syria](#)

The Women's Protection Units (YPG) were formed in Northeastern Syria and took part in the fight against ISIS. They became known internationally as the braided fighters. They were influenced by Abuji feminist ideology, which emphasizes that women's emancipation and rights are linked to their rejection of the institution of marriage and their participation in the armed struggle²⁸. The picture was not quite as rosy as it was portrayed in the international press, as the formation of these units was accompanied by the recruitment of minors²⁹.

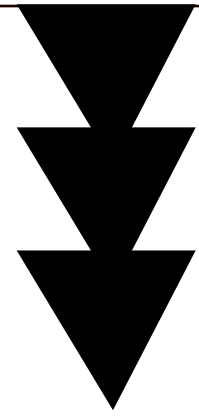
Consequently, women had a more significant multifaceted presence in the Autonomous Administration areas, including in military positions. However, this increased presence did not eliminate the persisting social violence that women faced. There were 21 reported honor killings³⁰ between January 2020 and February 2021. Furthermore, societal customs and traditions in the Syrian Kurdish regions continue to override civil laws concerning inheritance. The struggle for women to claim their rightful share of inheritance remains a pressing issue, highlighting the social disadvantages women face³¹.

²⁸ [Sabih Khalil, The reality of Syrian Kurdish women and the heresy of Abuji feminism](#) ³⁰ [Ibid](#)
³¹ [Ibid](#)

²⁹ [Syria: 49 Cases of Child Soldier Recruitment Verified in AANES Areas in 2022 - Syrians for Truth & Justice](#)



Co-Presidency in the Autonomous Administration



Co-management, or participatory management, as defined, involves the inclusive participation of all individuals in decision-making across all levels, ensuring that decisions are collectively made between these levels³². In contrast, the co-presidency system implemented by the Autonomous Administration focuses on co-presidency specifically within administrative roles. In this system, each presidency position is filled by both a man and a woman who share the role. However, this co-presidency model is not extended to other administrative and political levels.

The co-presidency system, introduced in 2016³³, enforces equal representation of both women and men in the top positions of each institution.

³⁴For instance, in a local council, the presidency is jointly held by a man and a woman.

While the total percentage of female workers reached 50.3% of the overall workforce, the 50% quota requirement was applicable exclusively at the co-presidency level.

Consequently, this meant that there was no quota for women in roles outside the co-presidency, resulting in non-implementation of the quota, especially in working committees.

This research paper tries to answer several questions in order to ultimately explore the main research question posed by this paper:

Is co-presidency a genuinely effective form of political participation for women?

Sub-questions include the following:

Were decisions really made based on joint consensus? Who had the final say in the co-presidency, particularly when the male

and female co-presidents disagreed on a decision? How were disputes ultimately resolved in such cases? Were women readily accepted as co-presidents, or did the male and female auditors, with a potential bias towards the male co-president, regard her as a deputy or vice-president?

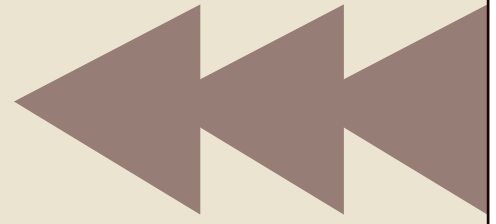
Based on the above, this research aims at answering, as well, the following question: To what extent does the Kurdish Autonomous Administration system, as perceived by women actively engaged in it or knowledgeable about it, contribute to enhancing the political participation of Syrian women?

³² [Participatory management](#)

³³ [Article, Ramziya Muhammad: Women's Pioneering Role in AANES Institutions](#)

³⁴ [Women in North and East Syria](#)

Methodology



- Methodology
- Research Participants
- Survey Participants
- Focus Group Participants

Methodology



The research adopted a qualitative research methodology to gather in-depth data regarding the experiences and opinions of women engaged in political activities within the Autonomous Administration, as well as women acquainted with such political activities. Three distinct research tools were used, each tailored to address a specific sub-question within the research, ultimately answering the main research question.

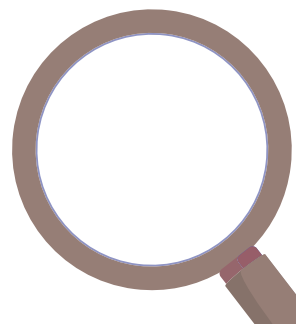
1: The Exploratory Phase

The first tool employed was in-depth individual interviews, carried out in the framework of the initial exploratory phase. These interviews generally aimed at understanding the situation in the region, identifying the key research steps and contextually relevant topics that the research should focus on. During this phase, three interviews with political and feminist activists were conducted in the form of open discussions designed to provide a broad overview of the Northeast region under the Autonomous Administration.

The exploratory phase included interviews with three political and feminist activists: Sabiha Khalil (a feminist activist, politician, and researcher with affiliations to the feminist political movement, who also has previous work experience with the Kurdish National Council. She is now regarded by Kurdish parties as an independent figure.

She lives abroad); Mahoush Sheikhi, (an independent feminist and political activist. She is initially from the region and is deeply informed about it. She lives abroad); and Shams Antar (a feminist and political activist associated with the Syrian feminist political movement, lives in the region. She is well informed and is independent from Kurdish political affiliations).

This exploratory stage helped in gaining a deeper understanding of the Northeastern region of Syria and ultimately helped in designing the survey, developing its questions, and selecting research sources. Additionally, the research paper was able to transform its main question into a series of sub-questions based on the opinions of the participants during this phase.

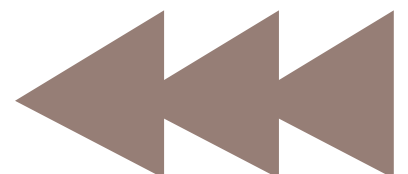
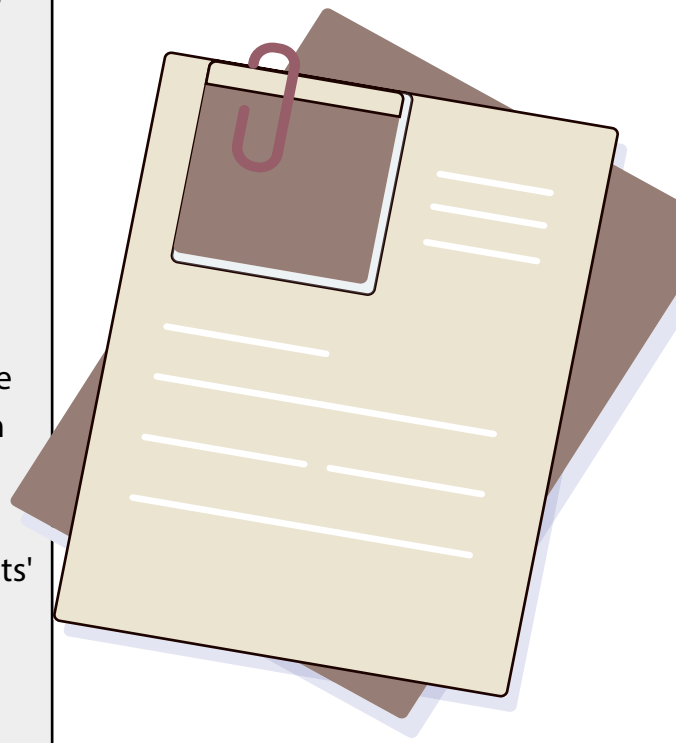


2: Data Collection Phase

The main data collection phase was completed in two stages. The first stage involved gathering opinions through surveys from women in northeast Syria or those residing abroad who still maintained connections to northeast Syria. The second stage involved obtaining in-depth opinions, through two focus group discussions with Kurdish women residing both inside and outside Syria, as well as women of Arab background residing in the area under the Autonomous Administration.

The 2023 survey was distributed online. Within a span of two weeks, fifty-eight women responded. These women either reside in the region or have affiliations with organizations operating in the area, even if they live outside the country. After sending an initial pilot version of the survey to five women and modifying it based on their feedback, it was refined to better address the primary research question. It aimed to gather participants' opinions on various aspects, including their views on gender quotas and women's political participation. It also sought to gather their opinions on co-presidency within the Autonomous Administration, assessing both whether it is perceived as a form of quota implementation and as an actual opportunity for women participation. The questionnaire was distributed by women activists who either reside in the area or are in the diaspora but maintain political or civil society affiliations with it.

In order to obtain more accurate answers and wider knowledge, focus group discussions were organized, with two discussions conducted via Zoom. The first group consisted of Kurdish women primarily from the region, whether residing inside or outside Syria, who have strong political or civil society ties within the area. The second group comprised Arab residents of Raqqa.



- **Research Participants**
- **Survey Participants**

The respondents varied in age and came from various cultural, political, and ethnic backgrounds. The research aimed to include women from different segments in Northeast Syria and women residing abroad who maintain connections with the region.

The survey was shared online with women in the Autonomous Administration region who currently reside there, as well as women originating from the Northeast region of Syria but who currently live abroad, all of whom are still connected to the Syrian reality and political life. A total of 58 women, from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds both within and outside Syria, participated in the survey. The participants' ages spanned from 20 to over 50 years, with the age group 36-50 years constituting 41.4% of the participants (refer to **Figure 1**).

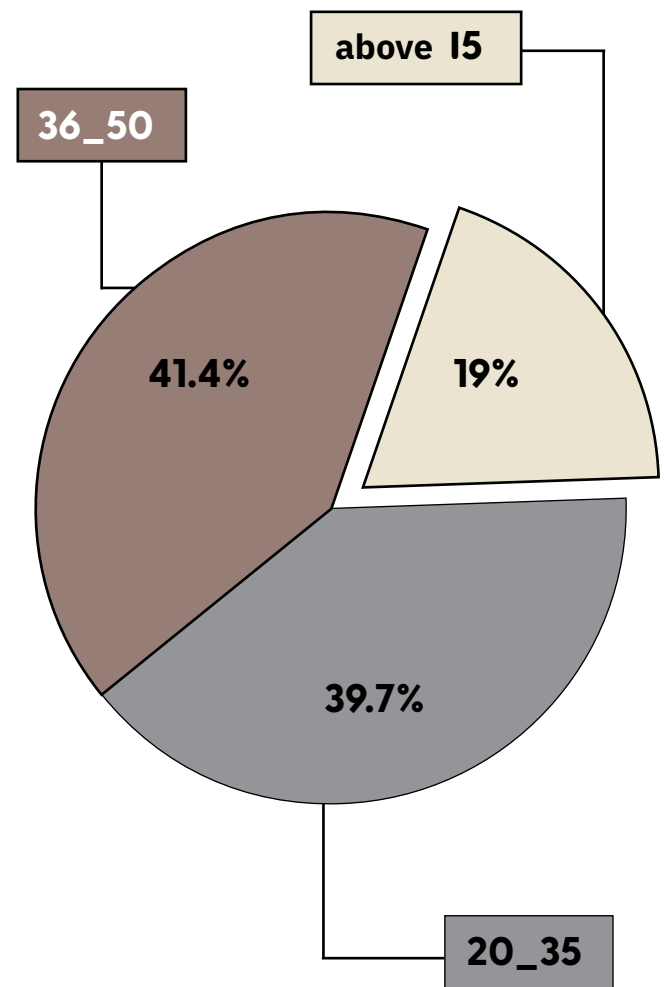


Figure 1

The women participating in the survey were asked about their marital status – whether they are single or married – as this might influence their participation in public life. Since women are often in charge of domestic tasks, their availability and commitment to public participation is usually affected by marriage³⁵. The marital status of the participants was diverse, with 67.8% being married women. See **Figure 2**.

³⁵ [Women's effective political representation, difficulties and challenges](#)

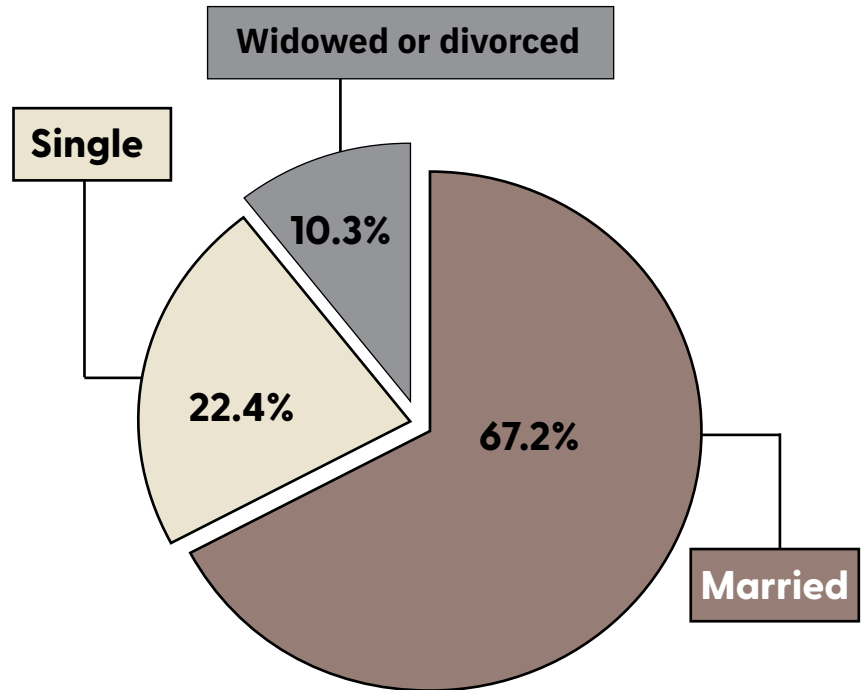
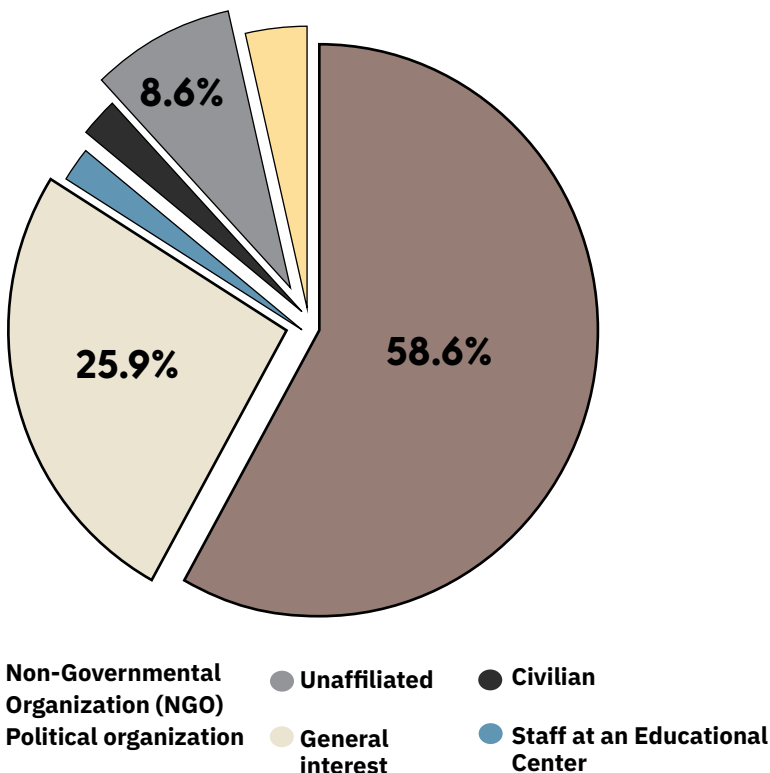


Figure 2



The organizational affiliations of the participating women varied, along with their years of experience in public work, both political and civil. Notably, 58.6% were associated with civil society organizations while only a small proportion, not exceeding 3.4%, had ties to political organizations. This distribution has implications on their degree of participation and their understanding of political life. See **Figure (3)**.

Figure 3

The duration and level of experience varied due to several factors, such as age differences and the diverse activities they engaged in before the 2011 revolution. Although women engagement in public affairs was somewhat limited in all regions, it still varied and was notably more prevalent among the Kurdish population, as revealed during the exploratory phase based on the participants' feedback. This discrepancy stemmed from the fact that political involvement among the Kurds was closely tied to the pursuit of national rights. In contrast, other regions experienced a decline in political activity, which had not been widespread to begin with. Syria, as a whole, had faced a decrease in political and civil actions, largely attributed to the prolonged authoritarian rule. This decline became especially apparent after the regime's tightened control following its clash with the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. The specificity of the Kurdish situation made political and civil activity more prevalent, leading to a slightly higher level of political involvement among Kurdish women compared to their Syrian counterparts in other areas.

The participants' interest in public affairs, whether political or civil, developed at various points in time. Some had this interest before the Syrian revolution began in 2011, while the majority, 62.1%, became more engaged after protests, as shown in **Figure 4**.

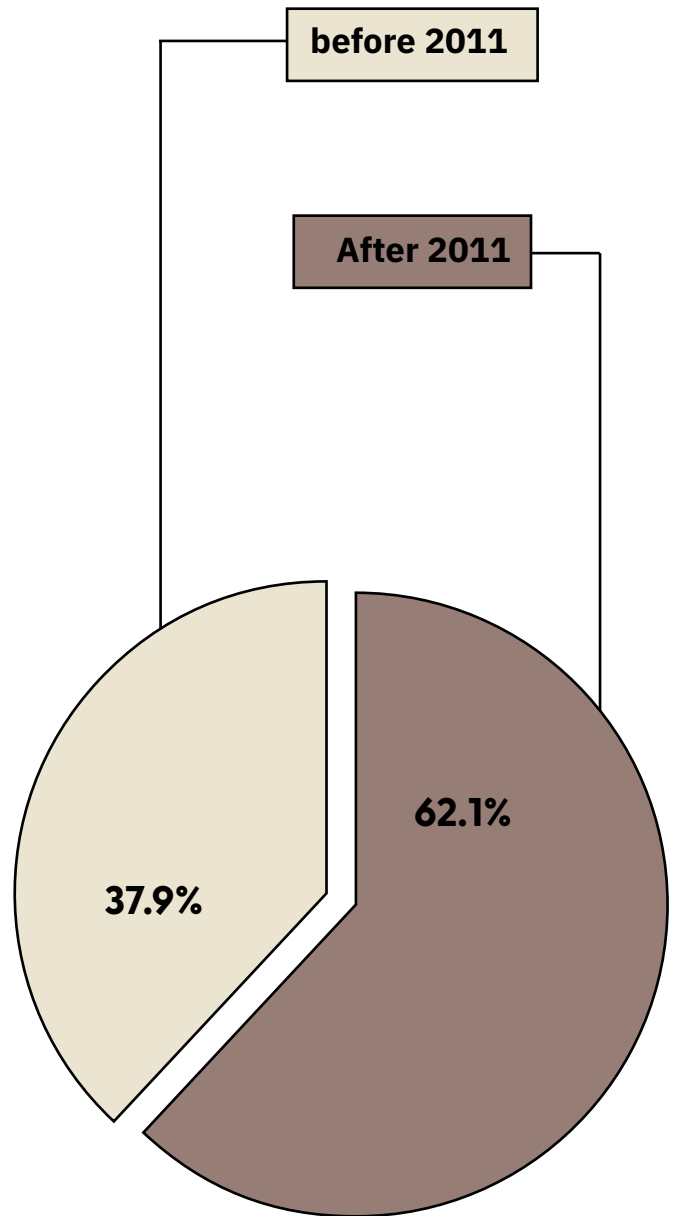


Figure 4

The Autonomous Administration adopted a co-presidency model for decision-making positions, as previously mentioned. This model involves joint leadership, with each position being held by both a man and a woman. Given that this approach is new in Syria and the first of its kind, it was crucial to assess the extent of participants' involvement in this experience or, at the very least, their knowledge regarding it, in order to analyze the responses accurately.

In the survey, 31.5% of the participants had experience with co-management, known as participatory management, while others only had knowledge about it. See **Figure (5)**.

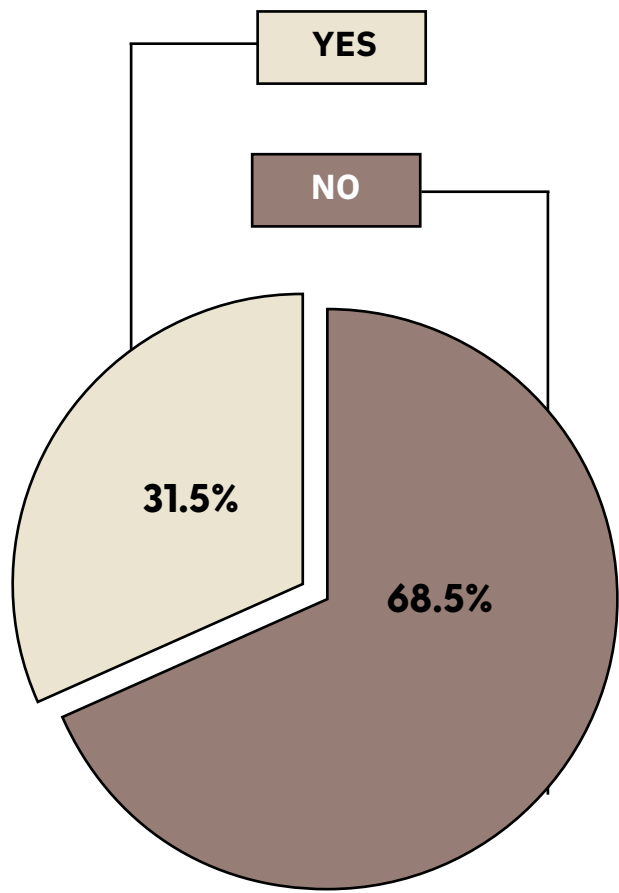
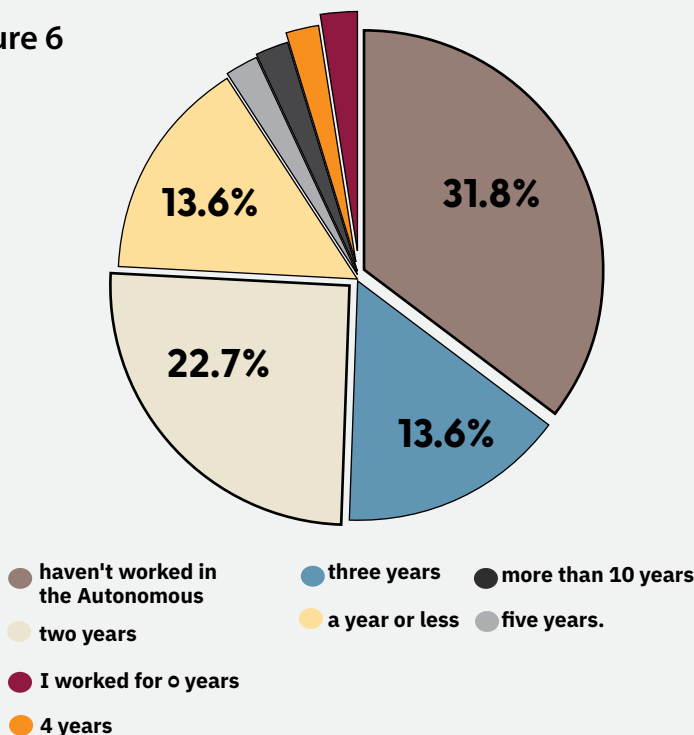


Figure 5

Figure 6



For participants who have experience with co-presidency, it was necessary to understand the duration and nature of their involvement in order to effectively analyze their responses. The duration and the specific role held by each participant in management and co-presidency varied among survey respondents, as demonstrated in **Figure (6)**.

For respondents who are not directly involved in co-presidency but are familiar with the concept, it was crucial to understand their level of familiarity with this experience. This assessment helped determine if they were adequately informed to provide either positive or negative evaluations of co-presidency. Knowledge of the co-presidency experience varied among participants who are not directly engaged in the practice. Approximately 61.1% of the participants had sufficient knowledge about co-presidency, which indicates that the data may not be entirely reliable or accurate. See **Figure 7**.

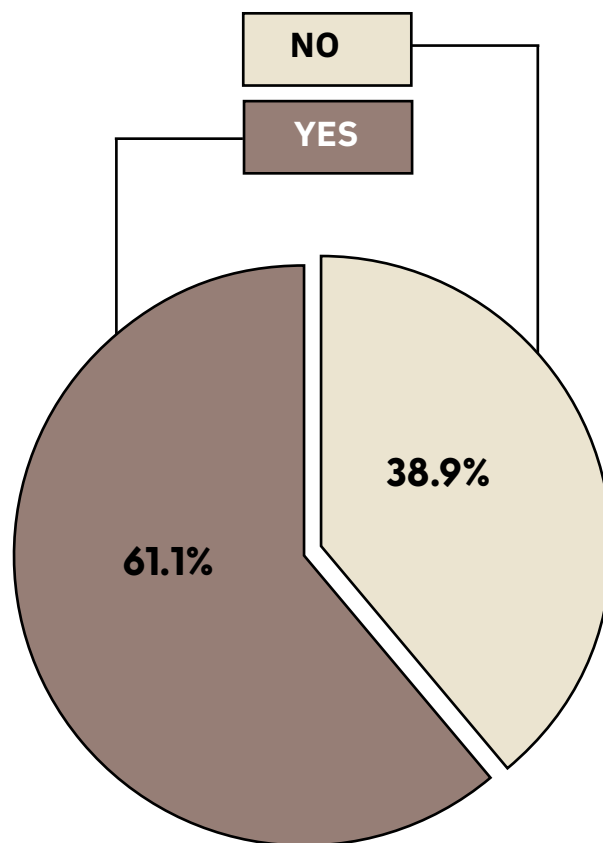
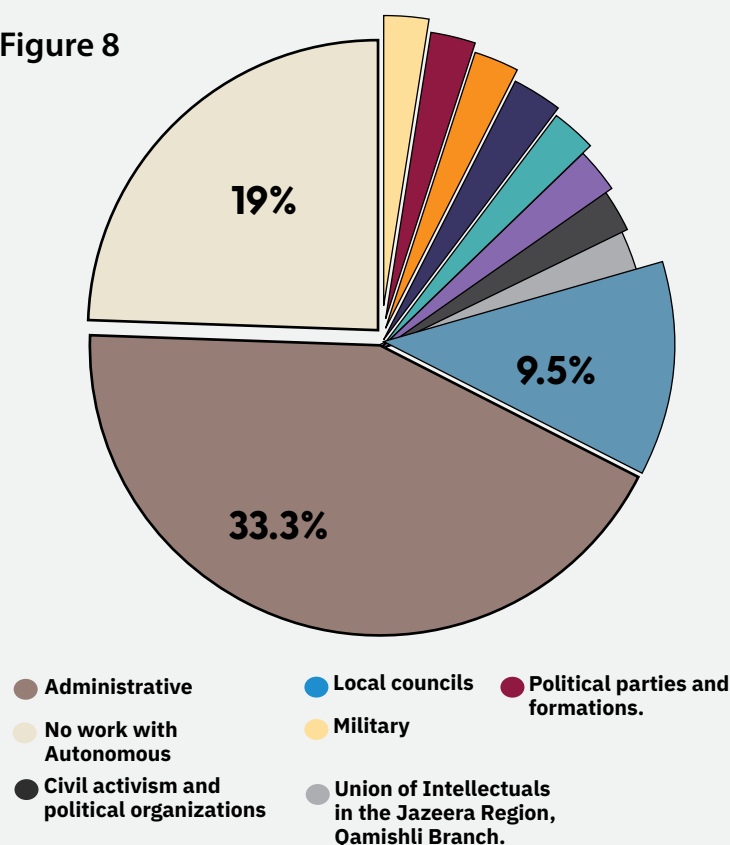


Figure 7

Figure 8



The nature of the participants' involvement in political and administrative life significantly influences the amount of information they can provide. Therefore, the survey asked participants about the nature of their involvement in the Autonomous Administration in order to effectively analyze their answers. Their participation in the co-presidency or co-management model, as well as the Autonomous Administration in general, varied from positions held within local councils to civil society organizations, and military roles. Administrative positions and administrative work accounted for the largest proportion, with 33.3%. See **Figure 8**.



Focus Group Participants

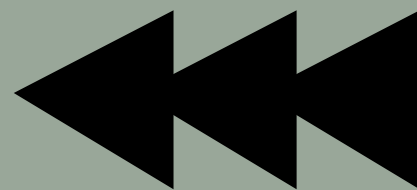
To delve deeper into the co-presidency model and address the pending questions that arose from survey results – especially since not all participants had work experience with the Autonomous Administration or adequate knowledge of the co-presidency experience in Northeastern Syria – two focus group discussions were conducted. The aim of these discussions was to confirm the research's results and the accuracy of its analysis. The discussions involved two focus groups and centered on the question of whether co-presidency can be regarded as a form of actual political participation for women.

Diversity in ethnicity, politics, and level of experience was accounted for in the composition of the focus groups.

Invitations to the discussions were extended to Syrian women from various ethnic backgrounds, diverse political experiences, and different age groups, while ensuring that the participants were from the region under the control of the Autonomous Administration. The first discussion included thirteen women, the majority of whom were Kurds, residing both inside and outside Syria. The second discussion included nine women of Arab background, all of whom were residents of the region. The comfort and freedom of expression of these women were safeguarded. Some participants in the focus group discussions had direct experience with co-presidency, while others were knowledgeable about it. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts either directly or through other participants, as well as through expert activists who were interviewed during the exploratory phase of the research.

The focus group interviews were held over Zoom with a view to learn more about the situation and gather more accurate information through extensive dialogue on co-presidency and the general situation of women in the Autonomous Administration. This was done with individuals of varying ages who are interested in and familiar with regional politics. Some had direct co-presidency experience. Ethnic and political diversity was accounted for during the selection process to ensure an objective exploration of the research's main question by hearing different and divergent opinions and isolating positive or negative preconceived attitudes. The distribution of the two groups took into account the participants' status to help them feel comfortable, confident, and open to speaking clearly and candidly.

Study Outcomes



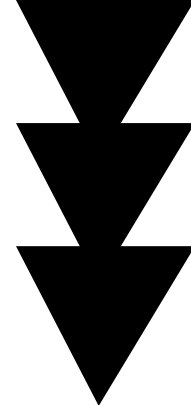
The Quota System

Survey respondents expressed different opinions regarding the importance and necessity of applying a quota for women, in addition to the required male-female ratio if such a quota is implemented. When answering the question about the importance of quotas, 40 of the female survey respondents agreed on the importance of implementing a quota.

In proceeding discussions, they elaborated that they agree with having a quota system for several reasons, namely that the Syrian society is patriarchal in nature, that women do not usually take part in society, that it is difficult to access roles and positions without having a quota in place, and that, in Syria, the efforts of both women and men are needed to rebuild what the war has destroyed. Some respondents demanded a 50% representation quota to guarantee gender equality, while others requested a minimum representation quota of 30%, particularly because they see the quota system as a temporary positive measure. Opinions varied regarding why the quota system is necessary.

Reasons included the fact that “[Syria] needs the combined efforts of both women and men to rebuild the country after the devastation caused by the war,” and that “[The quota system] grants women the right to participate,” “works on reducing the gender gap and helps women impose their presence in a patriarchal society” and “provides women with the opportunity to prove themselves at all levels in a society that still adheres to customs and traditions that are unfair to women.” The same survey participants stated that the “quota is a temporary positive measure, as it cannot eventually remain a reason for achieving actual participation.” Another participant considered “that it derogates women’s rights and gender equality, but it is necessary as a temporary measure.”

A Quota to Support Women in a Patriarchal Society



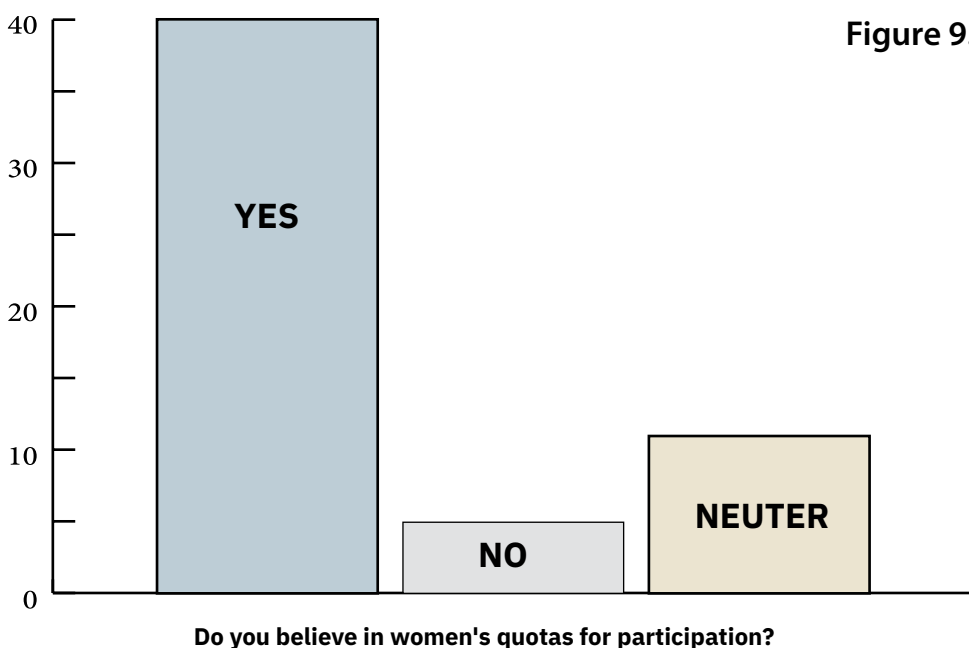
Six female survey respondents admitted that they were against the quota system, and they provided justification. Their opinions centered around the fact that the quota is ideologized and was previously used by the Ba'ath regime to guarantee access to male and female loyalists. As such, the quota system allows access to women who are not independent in decision-making, and it therefore does not reflect real women participation. Participation is one of the many rights of women, and no quota is needed to prove it.

One of the respondents said that she was against the quota "because participation is a right for women and should not need a quota system to safeguard it." Another respondent stated that "quota is ideologized and not independent; it is only a reflection of the presence of women but does not reflect their real participation."

Twelve female survey respondents showed a neutral stance regarding the quota system, as demonstrated in Figure 9.

Quota as an Ideologized and Non-Independent Tool

Figure 9.

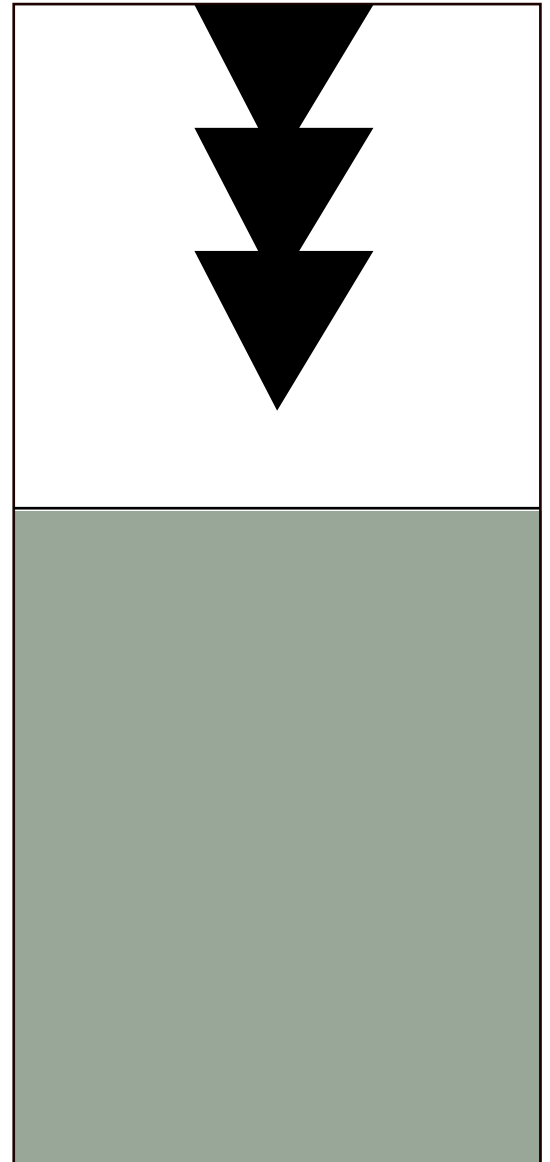


Focus group discussions confirmed the results of the survey. Some participants believed that the quota was necessary in a patriarchal society that excludes women, and that it helps serve the entire community and contributes to its progress. *“The quota contributes to society's development”* and *“it has contributed to activating women's role”* because *“the existing economic, social, cultural and political obstacles facing women hinder their access to decision-making positions in the absence of a quota.”*

These participants emphasized that *“the quota is a temporary positive measure”* and *“is a necessary tool amid special circumstances in country still in its state-building stage. It is the only solution in these circumstances, but after women are empowered and laws are enacted to protect them, the quota system would no longer be necessary.”*

Other focus group participants were against the quota because they consider participation to be among the basic rights of women, and it should be preserved without the need to be imposed through a quota system. *“Participation is the right of both women and men and should not necessarily be activated through a quota. Women and men have equal rights in political and civil participation.”*

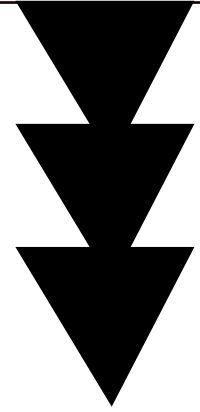
Others even believe that the quota does not achieve anything because both men and women have no power in Syria: *“Syrians have no power, so promoting the role of women is meaningless.”*



Quota and Women Empowerment

Focus groups participants expressed their concern regarding imposing a quota without empowering women because that would make their participation sham, especially if this experience is linked to women's previous and current participation in the People's Assembly of Syria, under the Syrian region, as participants explained that *“women's participation has always been ineffective, even in the People's Assembly of Syria.”* However, the majority of survey respondents saw the quota as a positive step, even if women's participation is inefficient, because it ensures the presence of women in decision-making positions, which would evolve with time, and empower women politically by continuously engaging them in work until they reach effective participation. In other words, the quota system *“creates familiarity with the presence of women in decision-making positions, and this is important.”* Furthermore, all participants emphasized the importance of empowering women to play an effective role, whether through a quota or without it.

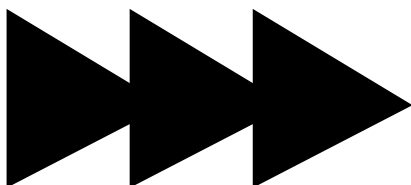
Women's Political Participation in Areas Controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria



The study explored the opinion of women in the focus groups regarding women's political participation in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – before and after this control – in an attempt to understand and analyze the current situation of women participation. The respondents all agreed that political participation in Syria was historically almost non-existent, weak, or only a formality, whether among the Kurds or the entire Syrian people. Political work before the 2011 revolution was either officially conducted through the regime or in secret opposition.

“Political activity was staged as a formality and politicized according to the ruling party,” said one participant. Another woman explained that *“oppositional political activity was secret, which pushed women away from getting involved in it for fear of arrest and other possible consequences, and for fear of not being accepted by society afterwards.”*

Participants revealed that women's political presence in the Kurdish society has its own distinguishing characteristics, and that is due to the national persecution that the Kurds have historically been facing. *“There is an unachieved national cause, which led the Kurdish community to pay closer attention to politics.”* However, *“before 2011, women's presence was shadowed by men's, and women participation in political life constituted a protective cover for men.”* The participants mentioned that this presence often *“stemmed from the family's political affiliation.”*



Female focus group participants mentioned that after the affiliation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) through the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in Syria, the Syrian Kurds developed further interest in politics, and the presence of Kurdish women in the political sphere increased, as women entered the military field.

However, this did not bring democracy to the society because of the party's undemocratic nature, for participants considered that **"this party is oppressive to others as well."**

Participants confirmed what was previously mentioned in the literature review of the research, that the 2011 revolution had a significant impact on reviving political life in the country, pushing a larger number of women to engage in public, political, and civil affairs.

This was also true in the Northeastern region and among all national groups and religions. Respondents mentioned that women's political presence in Northeastern Syria declined during the period of ISIS control, as the ruling authority greatly suppressed women. Nevertheless, their role

did not end there. Participants mentioned that women had a role within the ISIS Hisbah system, and stressed that after ISIS was expelled from the region and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria took control with Western European and American support, women's presence increased, in the political, civil, and military fields. The Women's Protection Units (YPG) participated in the ISIS expulsion operation. However, this did not entail real and free women's participation, as many of the military participations were criticized and included the kidnapping of minors. **"Minor girls were kidnapped to participate in fighting and militarization, even though their participation was prohibited according to the Charter of the Social Contract³⁶."**

The participants confirmed that co-presidency or co-management was adopted in decision-making positions in the Autonomous Administration, as a man and a woman shared each high-level post. Some female participants in the focus groups have experience in co-management, while others are only acquainted with the concept.

³⁶ [The Social Contract serves as the Constitution in the area controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Its first version was drafted in 2014.](#)

Co-Presidency Implementation Mechanisms



The survey included questions regarding the respondents' opinions on co-presidency implementation mechanisms in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria: How are decisions taken? Do decisions have to be approved by both co-presidents? Can one partner take the decision alone (unilaterally) in a co-presidency position? If so, who is the co-president that normally takes the unilateral decision?

The respondents' answers varied regarding whether decision-making unilateral or bilateral, knowing that respondents either had previous experience working in the Autonomous Administration or were well-informed about co-presidency. 31.8% of respondents believed that decision making was unilateral, and 54.5% stated it was bilateral. Others explained that unilateral decisions were taken occasionally or under certain circumstances or depending on the personalities of the co-presidents and their connections. See **Figure 10**.

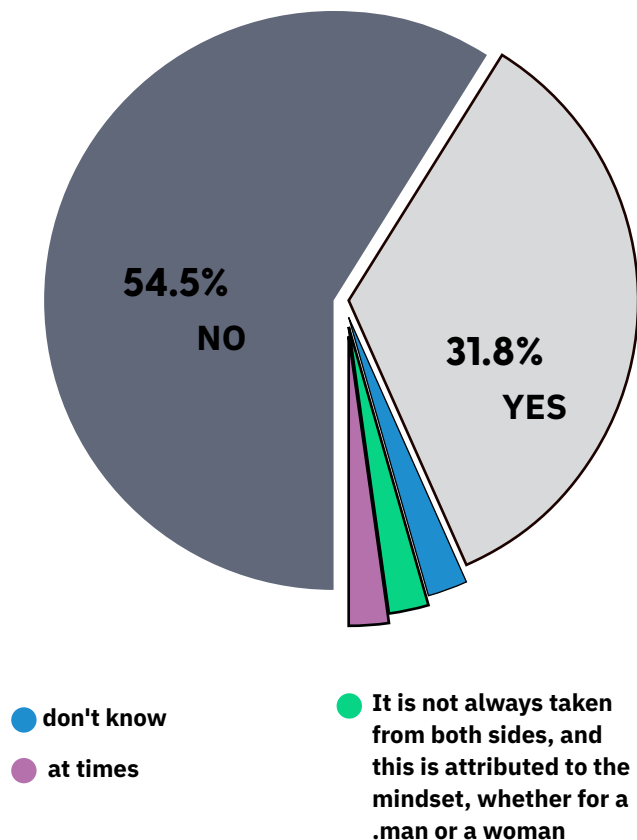
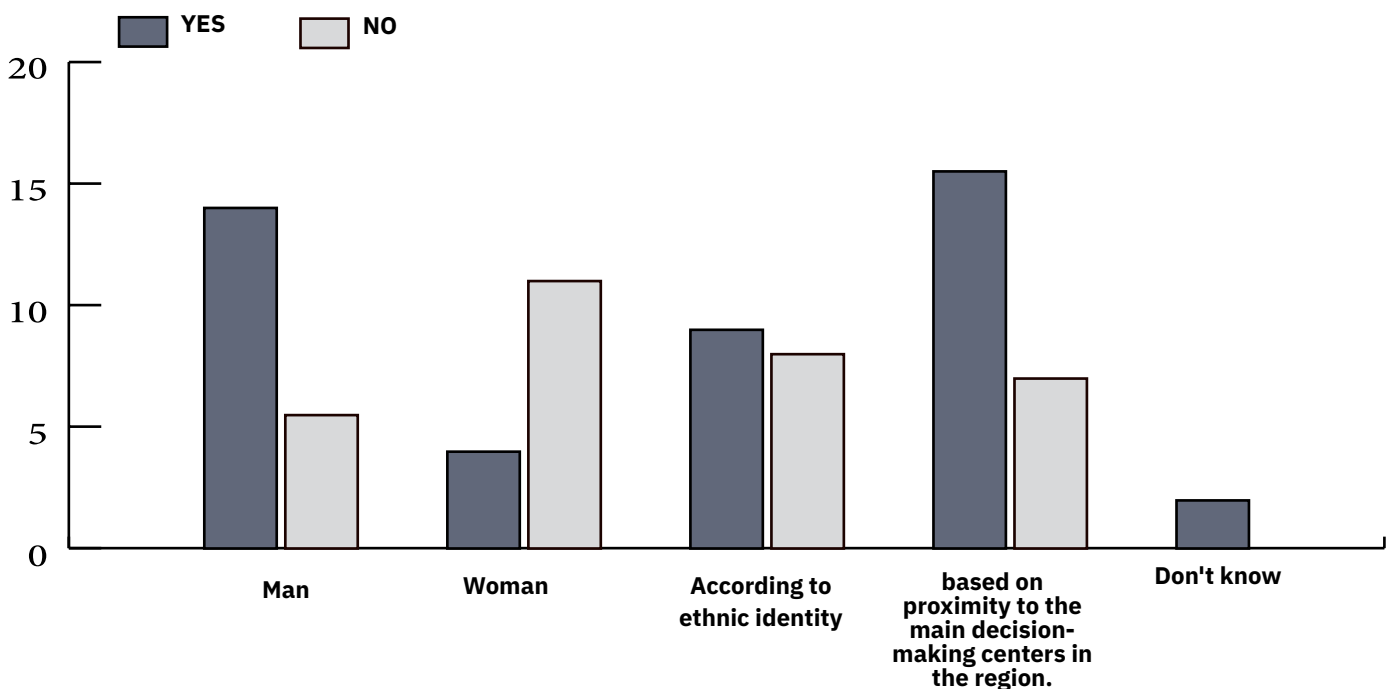


Figure 10

When asked about which co-president – the male or the female – usually takes unilateral decisions, female respondents reported that the male co-president is the one who is usually in control and takes such decisions. 14 participants stated that men make decisions without consulting the female co-president, and 12 other participants denied that women co-presidents do the same. 9 respondents argued that unilateral decision-making was not related to the co-president's gender, but rather to their ethnic affiliation, and 16 respondents said it was related to the co-president's ties with high-level decision-making cadres in the Autonomous Administration.



As it is important to further understand decision-making in co-presidency, the survey and focus group discussions touched upon certain follow-up questions: What are the mechanisms for implementing co-presidency? How are the decisions taken? Do decisions need to be approved by both partners? Can one partner/co-president make the decision alone, and if so, is it the male or female co-president?



Most of the focus group participants said that decisions can be taken unilaterally, usually by the co-president closest to the high-ranking decision-makers, regardless of gender and national belonging. According to the participants, high-ranking decision-makers are the PKK cadres located in Qandil Mountains in Iraq, or the main PYD cadres in Syria. For example, it was mentioned that **“an Arab woman close to Mazloum Abdi was always the decision-maker in her position.”** Participants also mentioned that the selection mechanism was also based on loyalty to the high-ranking cadres³⁷, and claimed that becoming a co-president does not require relevant experience or university education. Some participants even called the cadres **“ghosts,”** because they are present everywhere and influence all life aspects, without making an appearance.

On the other hand, other female participants mentioned that the final say is for the man, and that auditors treat female co-presidents as vice presidents. One of the participants blamed the women, as they receive the necessary support but do not make the required effort. **“The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria supports women, but women give up their rights and do not make the effort necessary to fulfill their role.”**

Participants mentioned that women have historically suffered from oppression and marginalization, which reduced their capabilities compared to men, except in a few cases. Life circumstances did not provide women with suitable knowledge and empowerment opportunities, either because of family and societal pressures that might have limited their education, or because of domestic duties that take up most of their time, and do not allow them the same amount of time as men for learning and acquiring knowledge. This affects their capabilities, and according to one of the female participants, **“women are less capable due to their circumstances and the historical situation.”** Yet, according to another participant, women were able to empower themselves over time and engage in the work: **“At first, we felt that the PYD was exploiting women because they were illiterate, but with time, they worked on themselves and achieved success.”**

In addition, participants mentioned that in the military sphere, such as the military forces and the police, men and women are completely separated; women units do not allow any masculine presence. **“Women and men units are completely segregated in the military and police, but they still coordinate together.”** They also reported that despite this coordination, there is no regulatory overlap, and unit leaders for female units are exclusively women. In this sense, women leadership in the military cannot be considered as a joint venture between men and women or as an aspect of co-presidency.

Based on the above, it is safe to conclude that unilateral decisions are most often taken by men, unless women are closer to high-ranking cadres. The empowerment, presence, and personality of women may play a role in mitigating male monopoly over decision-making, but this requires their effort and determination. Accordingly, working on women empowerment may reduce their marginalization.

³⁷The term cadres is used to refer to PKK members who train people in Qandil Mountains and manage public life in the region. They are men and women who have a military lifestyle and often do not have a family life.

Effectiveness of Co-Presidency



In order to study the effectiveness of co-presidency, it was important to examine the co-president's reaction if their partner takes a unilateral decision. This is considered a measure of the keenness of the co-president to perform the role assigned to them. In this regard, the survey included a question directed at participants who have experience in co-presidency, aiming to explore the reaction of their partner, based on the participants' experience and observations.

The answers to the question regarding the partner's reaction varied. 26.3% of the participants mentioned that their partner accepted the unilateral decision, and another 26.3% stated that the partner accepted the decision but warned against taking unilateral decisions moving forward, and 10.5% said that the partner strongly refused that decisions be taken unilaterally. Figure 12 further elaborates the answers.

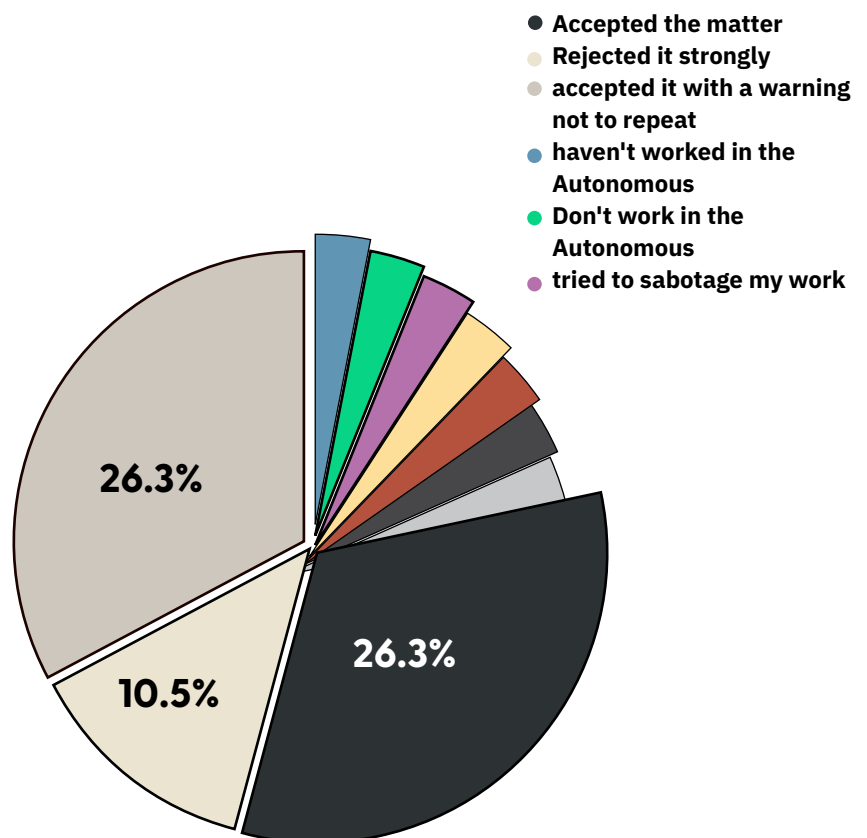


Figure 12

When the same participants were asked what their reactions were when their partners took unilateral decisions, 10% mentioned they accepted what had happened, 35% said they accepted the decision but warned against taking unilateral decisions moving forward, and 25% stated they refused their partner's behavior in taking unilateral decisions. Figure 13 clearly demonstrates these answers.

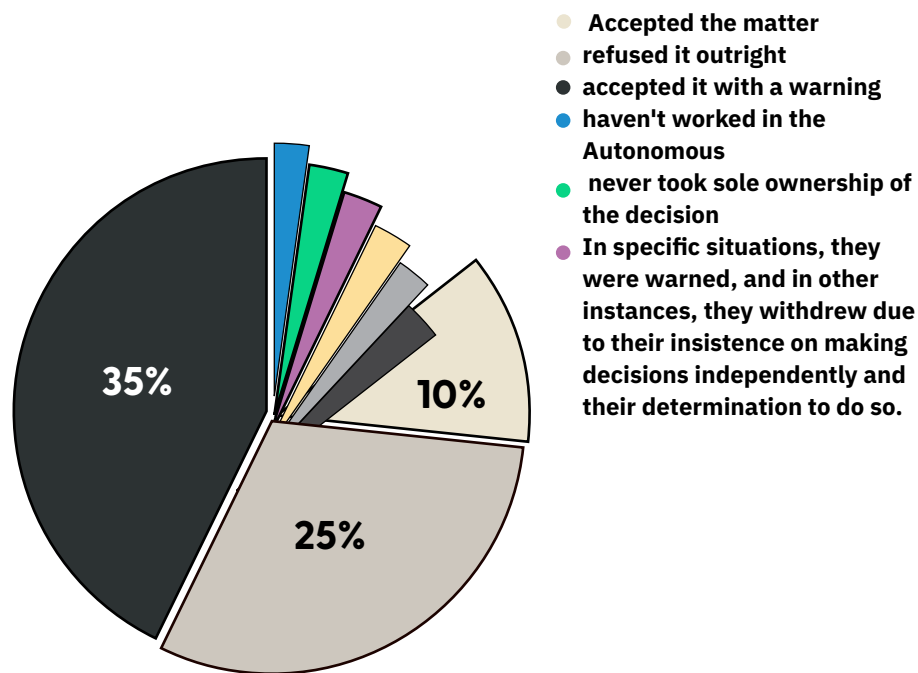


Figure 13

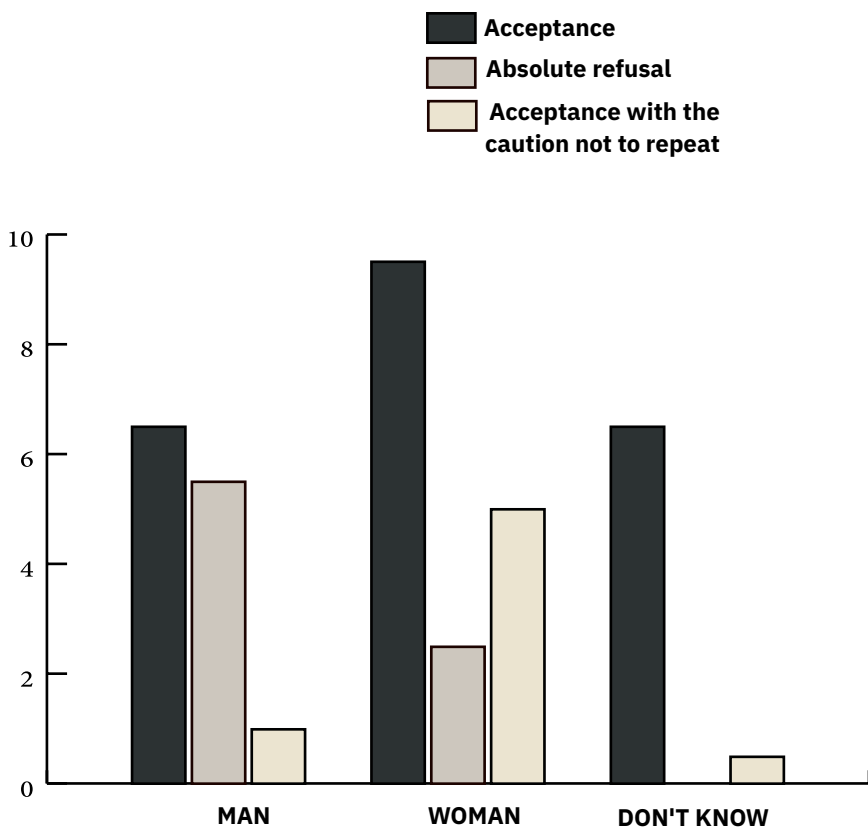


Figure 13

As for the women participants who do not have experience as co-presidents but are well-acquainted with the system due to their residency in the region or their ties with co-presidents, they believed unilateral decisions are met by acceptance from the weaker co-president – whether this weakness results from the gender superiority of men, or ethnic belonging, or inexperience in decision-making positions. They mentioned that it is often men or the co-president who is more experienced in decision-making who takes unilateral decisions, which, in their opinion, confirms the lack of efficiency of the co-presidency system. When asked about what they have witnessed from co-president reactions to unilateral decisions, 9 participants mentioned that it is the male co-president who met the unilateral decision with acceptance, while 12 participants said it is the female co-president who accepted the unilateralism, as evident in Figure 13.

To determine whether or not co-presidency is considered an implementation of the quota for women, it was first necessary to understand perceptions regarding women's role and participation in co-presidency. Does co-presidency entail true political participation or a participation in administrative work only? When asked this question, 48 participants considered that co-presidency requires from women no more than administrative participation, 33 participants considered co-presidency as merely a job, and 30 participants considered it as an exercise of political participation. See Figure 14.

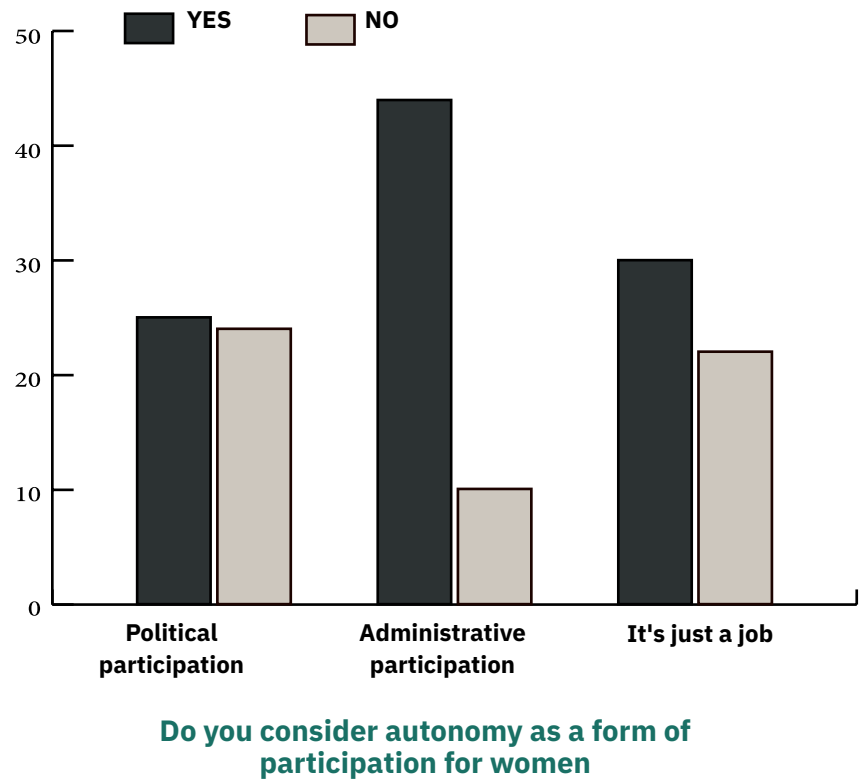


Figure 14

When participants were asked why they perceived co-presidency as such, those who considered it merely a job explained that it is an official administrative position.

One participant further elaborated: *"I never thought of it as more than a job to make money,"* and *"women, in general, consider co-presidency as a job because it is men who do the actual management. Women are just a façade."*

Still, some believed that co-presidency can be both administrative or political, depending on the position. *"Co-management for both, men and women, is an administrative or political participation, alongside being a job, and that, depending on the relevant position or entity in which it is exercised."*

Those who perceived co-presidency as a political participation believed that everything is linked to politics, and that any women participation is a political presence for women, for *"everything is intertwined, and it is impossible to separate the political sphere from the administrative sphere and the job."*

The majority of the focus group participants considered co-presidency to be ineffective and unaccepted by society because *"society bullies female presidents."* They also saw co-presidency as a reason for bureaucracy and delaying decisions, with the presence of women as a formality.

Some participants attributed the lack of effectiveness to women's incapability and lack of confidence in their decisions, making their role a formality.

A number of participants deemed the co-presidency experience as unsuccessful, particularly due to the ineffectiveness of its role in serving society and managing societal affairs, or in solidifying the presence of women and safeguarding their rights. According to one participant, the co-presidency experience did not change the situation of women in the region or their social, economic, and political circumstances, and *"did not have a real impact on women's lives."* Another

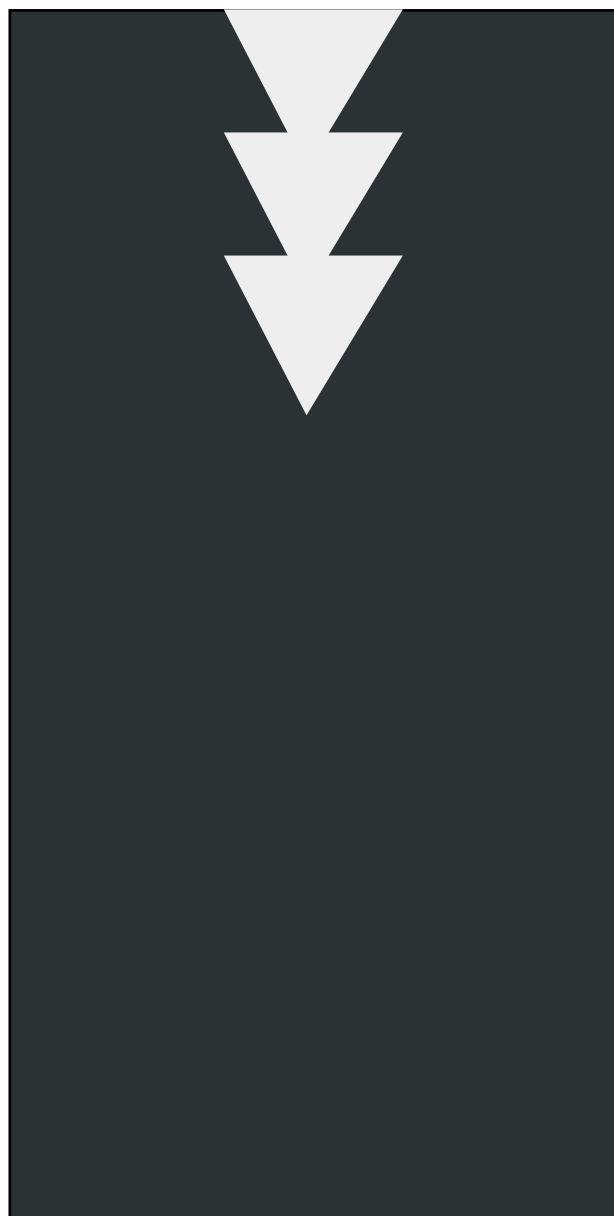
participant mentioned that **“co-presidency did not end the societal and political injustices women face,”** and a third participant viewed it as merely a façade. She explained that, so far, decisions are practically still taken in Qandil Mountains: **“The real decisions are taken by cadres who follow an ideological affiliation, regardless of their gender – for they are trained not to have a family life linked to their gender.”** Another participant even saw such co-presidency creates an environment of hostility between men and women.

On the other hand, certain participants considered co-presidency an indispensable step and a useful experience that can be leveraged, as it paves the way, albeit slowly and gradually, for real change in society. **“top-down change practically changes the situation of women and, with time, leads to real change.”**

Another group of participants considered that co-presidency could have been more useful in changing the situation of women in the region had it not been for the PYD. The PYD’s control over co-presidency and exclusively assigning party loyalists as co-presidents has made the experience similar to that of the Ba’ath Party in Syria, meaning that it would likely not effect any real change. Certain participants who had previously held positions as co-presidents defended their effectiveness in performing their job.

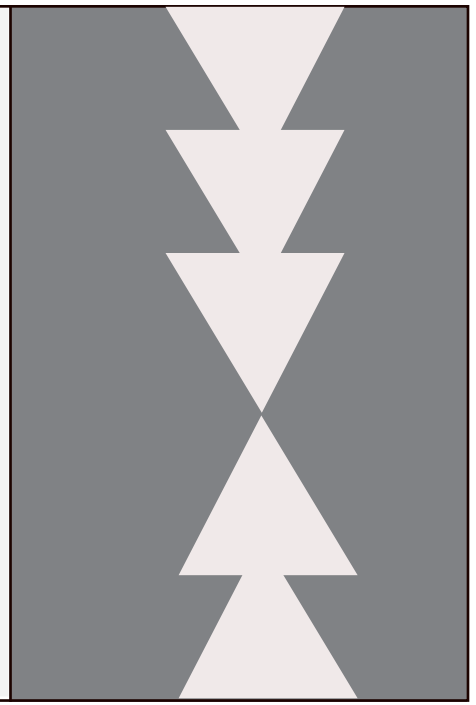
They affirmed that they did have a role in decision-making, and that the mentioned difficulties did not stop them from fulfilling their role. Others who had also held positions as co-presidents described their experience as unsuccessful, explaining that they did not have a real role. The flaw, in their opinion, was inherent in the co-presidency system, which does not empower women to perform an effective role.

Therefore, the numerous criticisms of the co-presidency experience show that it cannot be considered a true political participation for women, especially that co-presidency is often practiced in administrative positions, with no



measures that prevent unilateral decision-making if the two co-presidents are not of equal power. Despite these pitfalls, however, the co-presidency experience was an important factor in motivating women to engage in work and public life. It is thus necessary to leverage this advantage and work on overcoming the drawbacks, particularly as regards unilateral decision-making, whether as a result of gender differences, ideological reasons, or the close ties one of the co-presidents has with the ruling cadres.

Co-Presidency Is Not an Application of the Quota



Women's quota, as mentioned earlier, refers to a percentage of decision-making positions reserved for women. Based on this definition, is co-presidency considered an application of the quota system, where women occupy a high 50% of the positions?

The participants' views varied in this matter, as 32.8% considered that co-presidency is not an application of the quota system, especially since they do not even consider it a real participation opportunity for women. This is clearly depicted in Figure 15.

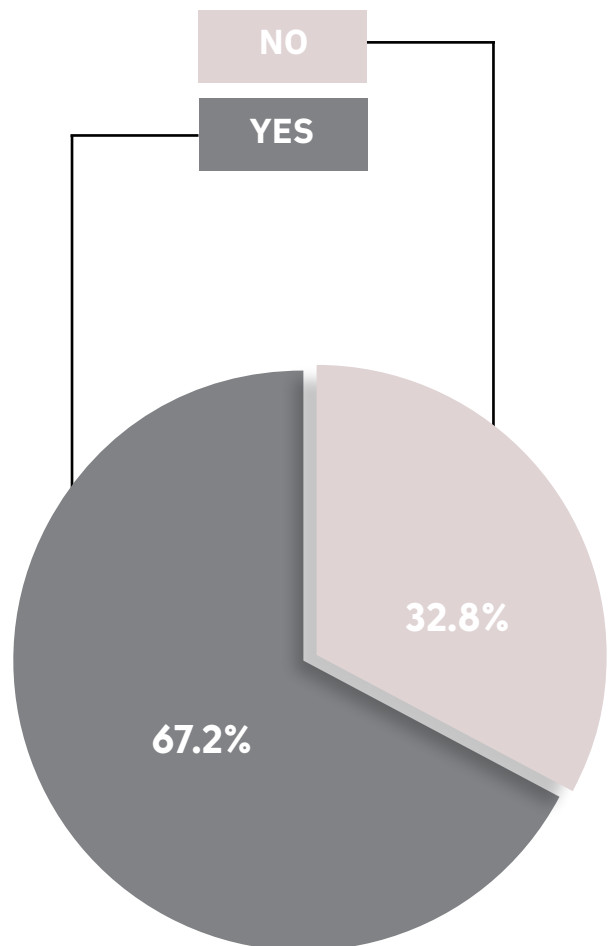


Figure 15.

Some focus group participants do not see co-presidency as a quota application because women must be the actual decision-makers to truly fill the positions allocated to them through quota. This made the participants wonder why women are co-presidents in the first place and not presidents – without a partner – occupying half of the decision-making seats. In this sense, seats and positions are to be split between men and women rather than have each seat shared by the two. **“Why can’t women, alone, be decision-makers?”** they asked. Not to mention, as well, that co-presidency is only practiced in high-ranking administrative positions and not political parties, for example. This shows that women are still politically excluded with many parties not adopting quotas. **“The co-presidency law does not apply to political parties,”** as women head women organizations only.

One participant considers co-presidency to be a defective implementation of the quota system: **“In Qandil, where the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is the policymaker, there are no women decision-makers.”**

Other participants believe that the woman’s performance of the position's duties determines her participation, whether it is an administrative participation, a true political participation, or just a fulfilment of the job. This depends on the woman’s abilities and capabilities, her presence, as well as her ability to persuade and make decisions. **“Co-presidency can represent a true political or administrative participation when women are powerful in the position they hold, regardless of their affiliation, but it is merely a job when women are not given the chance to be ambitious and make decisions in the positions they hold.”**

Given that co-presidency is only being applied to administrative positions without being practiced elsewhere, such as in committees, political bodies, or CSOs, and given that co-presidency does not guarantee for women the right to decision-making and does not always prevent marginalization and domination, it does not contribute to achieving a quota that ensures women's presence, especially in light of party and ideological dominance and the lack of a real democratic atmosphere.



Conclusion



The survey and focus group discussions show that co-presidency is exclusively practiced in high-level administrative positions, shared by both a man and a woman. No quota for women is applied in lower administrative positions, political work, or civil work. This practice can thus accurately be named co-presidency rather than co-management, as was envisioned before the research was conducted. Co-management consists of participation and partnership at all levels, including all decision-making levels, while this co-presidency exclusively involves high-level administrative positions.

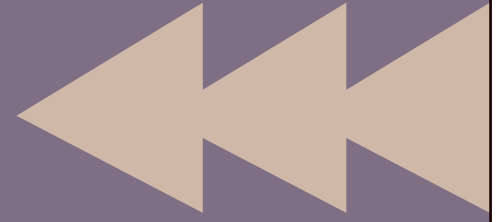
Research further demonstrated that co-presidency does not necessarily entail joint decision-making, as monopoly of decision-making often leads to unilateral decisions. Women could limit such monopoly if they are politically and administratively capable. Unilateral decisions are usually taken by men, or those with strong ties to the decision-making cadres, noting that these cadres and positions in Qandil Mountains strongly influence the administrative and political sphere in the region.

Research proved that co-presidency, despite being a positive step that should be leveraged, does not substitute quota implementation, which guarantees the effective presence of women in administrative and political decision-making positions.

Research also concluded that quota implementation is a necessary but insufficient step, that must be paralleled with the empowerment of women to efficiently fulfill their role and the provision of necessary assistance to help them navigate life's burdens.

Conclusion

Results and Recommendations



For women to play an effective role in co-presidency, favorable and supportive conditions should be provided to facilitate women's work, such as nurseries and childcare. Such initiatives grant women the time and comfort to perform their work and minimize the gender gap, especially in terms of capabilities and conditions conducive to work. Women should also be further empowered to overcome lack of experience and technical know-how that resulted from the historical circumstances that denied them equal learning opportunities as men. Although the quota is crucially important, it must be accompanied by selecting the right women for the right administrative or political position to ensure effective participation. Selection must be made based on competence rather than loyalty and ideological belief, which guarantees that positions are assigned to empowered women who are able to independently make decisions.

For women to effectively fulfill their role, they need a supportive environment that believes in the importance of their role. It is therefore not enough to simply educate women about the role. Social awareness campaigns should rather be carried out for all segments of society – men and women – regarding the importance of women's work and their participation in the public sphere, as well as the importance of the quota system.

Co-presidency in the Autonomous Administration is a new experience for Syrian society. It should thus be further highlighted emphasizing all women co-presidents and not just the female figures whose achievements receive praise in isolation of the overall

situation of women in the region. Such emphasis would help overcome the downsides of the co-presidency experience and further promote its upsides. Co-presidency is exclusively applied in high-level and senior administrative positions. The quota, however, should be implemented at all levels, rather than just in high-ranking positions. Political parties should be encouraged to adopt a women's quota and impose it in political decision-making positions. Whereas economic independence is a prerequisite for women independence, as confirmed by the participants, creating a real conducive economic environment and productive job opportunities for women helps them become real decision-makers.

Lack of democracy and the Kurdish Workers' Party's monopoly of power prevent the Autonomous Administration from becoming a true civil administration that is not controlled by the military and ideologies, and that effectively implements democracy, enables freedom of expression, and works on gradual change rather than oppressive change. Along these lines, subordination to the PKK must be overcome and replaced with an atmosphere of true democracy. This would end the one-party rule in the region and provide an environment that favors women's effective participation. The Autonomous Administration should be pressured to secede from Qandil Mountains, and the region should be managed by Syrians, so that decisions are properly taken by the comprehensive authority, ensuring that the Qandil Mountains region does not interfere in decisions and impose them top-down. This would enable women to become real decision-makers.

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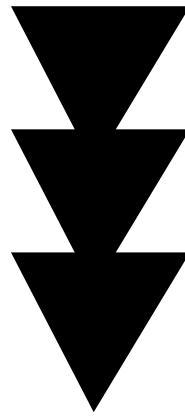
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The Dynamics of Politics and Power

**Why Is the Science of Women (Jineology) Being Taught in
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**How Kurdish women are transforming and democratising the
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**Jusoor, The Role of Women in the Kurdish Political Movement in
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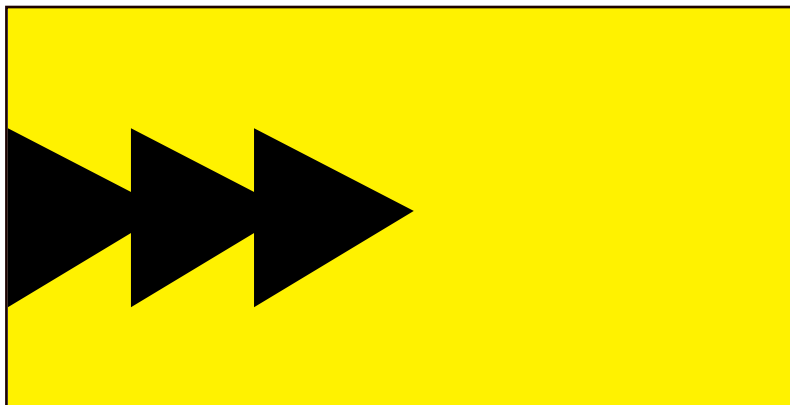
Women in North and East Syria, Hozan Hadi, Syria Untold

**Women's effective political representation, difficulties
and challenges - The Syrian Women's Political Movement
(syrianwomenpm.org)**



Co-Presidency within the Autonomous Administration

As a Model for Women's Political Participation



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