Climate Justice

in the Contexts of Reconstruction and Transitional Justice in Syria

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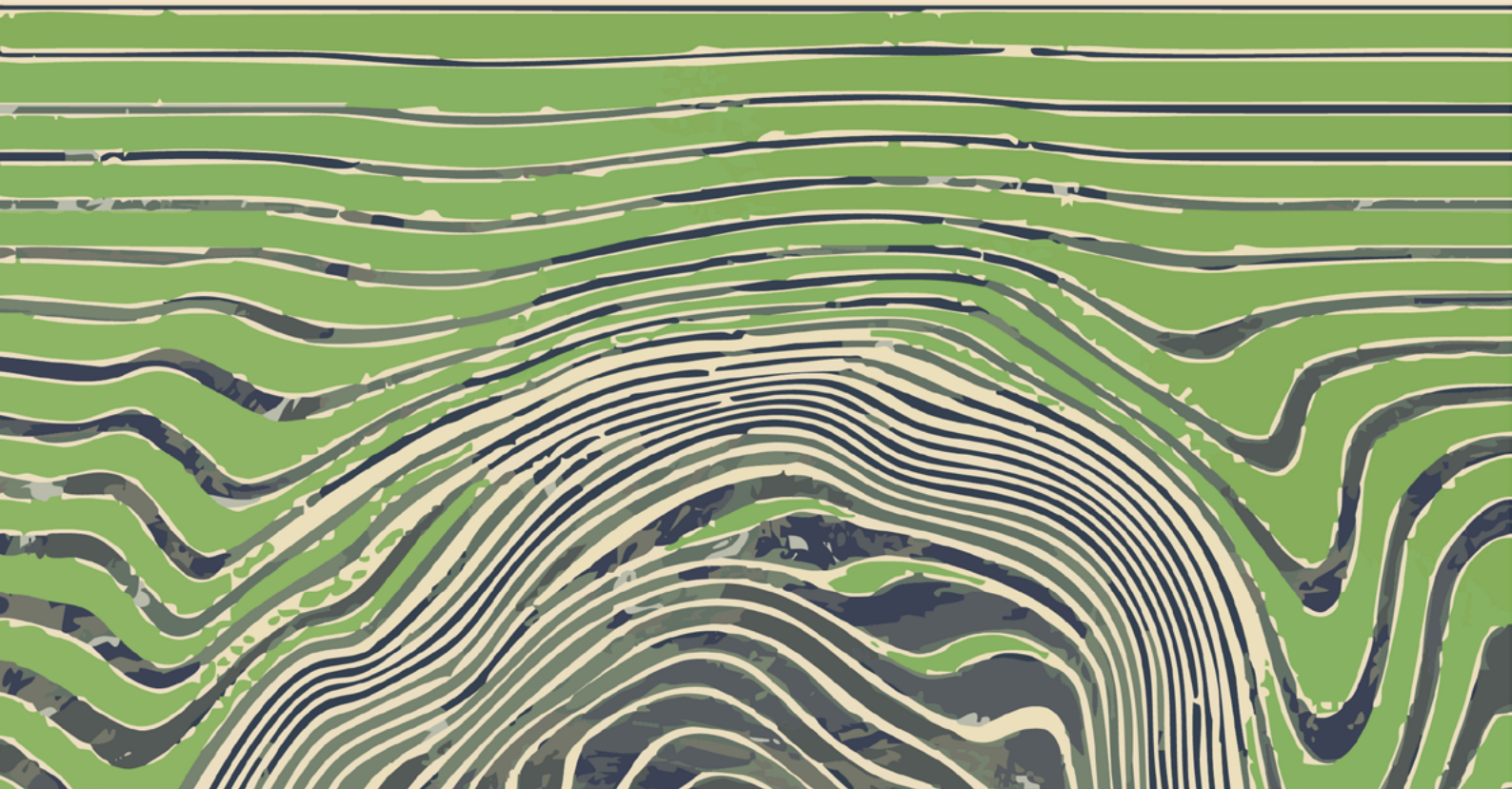

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Over the past years, the escalating climate crisis in Syria has intersected with a war that is among the most violent in the region's history. The conflict has been marked by the widespread use of highly destructive weapons against cities and infrastructure, including cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and barrel bombs, as well as the documented use of chemical weapons in multiple incidents. Alongside this extensive destruction, Syria has been treated by certain intervening actors as an intensive testing ground for military operations, giving the war an experimental character that has further amplified both its scale and complexity.

The consequences of the war have not been limited to human losses and urban destruction; they have also included the erosion of environmental and service systems upon which climate adaptation depends. The targeting of infrastructure, the collapse of state institutions, and the rise of war economies structured around resource extraction and control have all deepened climate vulnerability. As a result, Syrians have faced recurring droughts, rainfall variability, and the degradation of water resources within a context where institutions lack the capacity to respond or adapt.

Practices such as the burning and large-scale land clearing, the dismantling of irrigation networks, the planting of landmines in agricultural fields, the cutting of trees for heating amid economic collapse, and the operation of makeshift oil refineries were not merely byproducts of the conflict. Rather, they formed part of a war economy that has reconfigured the relationship between society, land, water, and energy. United Nations environmental reports indicate that the targeting and damage of oil facilities not only generate localised pollution but also drive the expansion of highly polluting informal refining practices, thereby intensifying air and soil contamination and prolonging environmental and health damage well beyond the cessation of hostilities.

On this basis, this paper proceeds from the premise that climate change in Syria cannot be viewed as an isolated environmental crisis. Instead, it must be viewed as the outcome of the intersection of military violence, the collapse of public governance, and the emergence of a war economy rooted in resource control and monopolisation practices. In this context, water, land, and energy are transformed into instruments of power and mechanisms forredistributing privilege, rendering the climate crisis part of a broader system of structural violence and inequality.

Accordingly, the paper argues for the integration of environmental and climate-related harms, which may, in some cases, be described as environmental crimes, into transitional justice and reconstruction processes. **This is framed as a matter of accountability, redress, and guarantees of non-repetition, rather than simply a technical issue intended to attract international support.**

Executive Summary

This paper examines the issue of climate justice within the contexts of reconstruction and transitional justice in Syria. It is grounded in the premise that the country's climate crisis cannot be separated from military violence and the governance transformations produced by the war. The targeting of infrastructure and essential services, the destruction of water, energy, and sanitation systems, and the expansion of highly polluting energy practices within a war economy have all contributed to the accumulation of long-term environmental harm. This harm now interacts with the accelerating effects of climate change, further intensifying resource vulnerability and undermining communities' capacity to adapt.

The paper demonstrates that the impacts of climate change in Syria cannot be disentangled from the structures of power governing resource management. With the proliferation of de facto authorities and the erosion of the concept of public service, water, energy, and land are no longer managed as public rights within national policy frameworks. Instead, they are distributed through networks of influence and purchasing power, within a context of undeclared privatisation, shadow economies, and the continuous transformation of resources into instruments of control and privilege redistribution.

The testimonies further reveal that climate-induced scarcity and rising temperatures do not produce socially neutral effects. Rather, they extend into the bodies and everyday lives of women and girls, becoming an additional site of structural violence and systemic neglect. As water availability declines and sanitation conditions deteriorate, and as healthcare services collapse and gender-sensitive protection policies are absent, risks related to hygiene, reproductive health, and care intensify. In some contexts, this environmental and service-related collapse intersects with gender-regulatory policies that legitimise violence and expand conditions for exploitation.

Executive Summary

Women in this study do not speak of climate justice as an abstract or purely technical concept, but through the lived realities that shape the rhythm of their daily lives: waiting for water, the collapse of agricultural seasons, forced displacement due to drought, and economic pressures that generate tension and violence within households and communities. Their bodies are directly affected by heat and inadequate services. These lived experiences reveal a broader structure where the war economy intersects with opaque resource management, alongside the continued exclusion of women from decision-making positions related to land, water, energy, and climate.

This paper is based on a foundational analytical review drawing on ten in-depth interviews with Syrian women from diverse regions and backgrounds, alongside three expert consultations in the fields of gender justice, climate justice, and mental health. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of all dimensions of the relationship between climate, war, governance, and transitional justice in Syria. Rather, it frames this intersection as a field that warrants further research, documentation, and policy engagement.

The paper concludes that ignoring these interconnections within political transition and reconstruction processes risks reproducing the very system that has deepened inequality and gender-based violence throughout the war. Rebuilding infrastructure without dismantling networks of monopoly, corruption, and resource extraction, or supporting the agricultural sector without reforming ownership structures and representation, amounts to restoring the material framework while leaving the underlying power structure intact. Accordingly, the paper approaches climate justice as a fundamentally political issue concerned with the redistribution of resources and power, and the establishment of transparent mechanisms for accountability and redress. It calls for integrating environmental and climate-related harms into transitional justice processes as part of victims' rights and guarantees of non-repetition, rather than treating them as a separate technical domain.

Methodology, Scope, and Limitations of the Study

This paper is based on ten in-depth interviews with Syrian women from diverse regions and social and professional backgrounds, as well as analytical interviews with three experts in climate justice, gender and mental health. A qualitative sample was used to reflect geographic and contextual diversity, including rural and agricultural areas, regions that experienced direct armed conflict, and regions subject to multiple de facto authorities during the years of war.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to freely share their experiences within broad themes related to resource management, particularly water and energy, agricultural land degradation, shifting patterns of labour and care, the impact of scarcity on household economies and daily life, and the reproduction of violence and domination.

All interviews were conducted remotely via digital communication tools, as the researcher was working from outside Syria.
While this approach enabled access to women in multiple regions that might otherwise be difficult to reach, it also imposes clear methodological limitations, particularly regarding the most vulnerable women, such as peasant women, agricultural workers, and those directly connected to land and natural resources in remote or marginalised areas. Moreover, the digital nature of the interviews means that women without consistent internet access, or those unable to speak freely in a safe digital environment, were excluded from the scope of this paper.

Methodology, Scope, and Limitations of the Study

The names of all women who provided testimonies from within Syria have been changed to ensure their safety and to avoid exposing them to potential risks associated with their participation.

The paper adopts a feminist, gendered, and environmental approach, situating these testimonies within their structural context. It does not separate individual experiences from the political and economic systems that produce them, nor from patterns of resource management and the redistribution of burdens within families and communities. The aim is not to interpret women's experiences from the outside, but to demonstrate how environment, power, and gender intersect within a shifting political and economic reality.

This paper is not presented as a comprehensive field study, but rather as a foundational analysis that seeks to incorporate climate justice into discussions of transitional justice and reconstruction in Syria.

It does not claim to cover all dimensions of the intersection between environment, economy, politics, and gender. Instead, it focuses on the issues that emerged as most recurrent and significant in participants' testimonies, such as water and energy management, agricultural land degradation, transformations in agricultural practices and labour patterns, and the impact of climate-related scarcity on social and economic relations within families and communities. From this perspective, the paper also aims to open the way for further, more in-depth research that ensures direct access to women most closely connected to land and agriculture who are often the most affected by climate crises and the least represented in public discourse and decision-making.

> ***"Interviews were conducted with Syrian women from diverse backgrounds, in addition to analytical interviews with three experts in climate justice, gender, and mental health."***

Conceptual Framework

This paper employs the concept of climate justice as a framework that moves beyond a purely technical environmental approach to encompass questions of the distribution of resources, burdens, and power, as well as gendered and social inequalities in the capacity to adapt to environmental crises.

Within this framework, patriarchy is understood not merely as a system of values or unequal social roles between women and men, but as a structure of power that governs resource distribution, labour, care, and political representation within the family, society, and the state.

From this perspective, climate justice is not limited to the distribution of environmental harms or opportunities for adaptation to climate change. It also entails interrogating and holding accountable patriarchal and male-dominated structures that determine who owns land, water, and energy; who participates in decision-making; and who bears the burden of unpaid care work and the daily costs of adapting to scarcity and service collapse.

In parallel, the paper approaches transitional justice as a process that extends beyond accountability for direct political violence to include redress, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition, encompassing environmental and climate-related harm caused by the war.

In this context, the paper uses the concept of environmental and climate-related harm to refer to the damage inflicted on land, water, air, infrastructure, and the conditions of life resulting from the intersection of war, climate change, and patterns of resource management during the conflict.

The paper also employs the term "environmental crimes" in a descriptive and analytical sense to refer to acts or policies that have caused serious harm to the environment, natural resources, and living conditions, without asserting that a unified international legal classification necessarily applies in all cases. Such classification would require an independent legal assessment based on the nature and context of each incident.

Photo: European Commission DG ECHO via Flickr (CC BY-SA).

Climate and War

Producing Vulnerability under Conditions of Fragmented Authority

Climate change in Syria is deeply intertwined with a reality shaped by prolonged war, fragmented authority, the disintegration of local structures, and the decline of public policy. In this context, drought and rising temperatures do not appear as isolated environmental phenomena but rather as part of a broader crisis shaped by how resources have been managed and power distributed over the years of conflict. Testimonies show that this fragmentation has produced varying patterns of control over land, water, and energy; yet the outcomes largely converge across regions: increasing environmental fragility, the absence of effective public protection, and unequal gendered burdens borne by women in managing scarcity within daily life.

As a result, land damaged by bombardment or left uncultivated due to displacement and insecurity has become more vulnerable to climate variability and less able to recover. The impact of war is not limited to the disruption of agriculture or markets; it also manifests as direct material damage within the agricultural environment itself, rubble, fires, and land clearing; explosive remnants and landmines; the deterioration of irrigation networks and agricultural services; and pollution linked to fuel burning and informal refining in some areas.

As irrigation services and infrastructure decline, the effects of war and climate change intersect in a complex process that simultaneously reproduces environmental and social fragility.

Moreover, widespread and recurrent fires, particularly during the summer months, have become an increasingly prominent feature of environmental fragility in Syria in recent years. These fires are exacerbated by drought, rising temperatures, deteriorating forest and natural resource management, and weak institutional response capacity. Their effects extend beyond the loss of vegetation and forests, affecting agricultural land and local livelihoods, adding a further layer of environmental and social fragility to a context already strained by war and weakened environmental governance.

In the southern countryside of Idlib, a region historically known for its olive and fig orchards, *Hala Qasim (a pseudonym)*, a freelance journalist who has worked as a field correspondent for local and regional media, focusing on conflict dynamics and their intersections with women's issues, marginalised communities, displacement, and the environment, describes a landscape that has been radically transformed:

"*The war has caused direct damage to the land in the southern Idlib countryside. Vast areas have been bombed, burned and cleared, and the soil has been damaged by unexploded ordnance and heavy machinery. Some land is no longer accessible due to landmines or its proximity to former front lines. Even the land that is available today yields poor harvests compared to the past. Many of the women I know have faced dangers whilst working in the fields due to unexploded ordnance or a lack of security.*"

Syrie ,Rabia, GHAITH ALSAYED / AP

Hasan Belal/TNH

She adds:
"*Water is controlled by multiple actors -local authorities, private well owners, tanker suppliers and sometimes humanitarian organisations. There is no consistent system or clear oversight in some areas, so distribution is often linked to the ability to pay.*"

This testimony illustrates that the effects of war are not limited to disrupting agriculture but are deeply embedded in the agricultural environment itself, through soil degradation, restricted access to farmland, and the ongoing risks posed by landmines and explosive remnants of war. In such a context, drought compounds the effects of land already exhausted by war, intensifying its impact on agricultural production and on the capacity of local communities to continue working the land. Furthermore, the multiplicity of actors controlling water transforms scarcity into a relationship of power and market dynamics, rather than a matter of public service, making access to water contingent on financial means and networks of influence.

Further east, in Raqqa, authority shifted multiple times throughout the conflict. The city also experienced a period under ISIS control, which reorganised public space and everyday life according to a strict, militarised and ideological patriarchal order, deepening structures of gendered domination that affected women farmers and agricultural workers even within the fields.

Sahba al-Faraj (a pseudonym), speaking as a representative of an organisation working in the city and focusing on psychosocial support and the political and economic empowerment of women, particularly those leaving al-Hol camp, closely observes, through her fieldwork, the impacts of climate change and drought on women and girls in rural Raqqa and the Al-Jazira region. She explains how climatic transformations intersected with broader political and economic shifts:

"*Before 2011, there was government intervention through agricultural associations and agricultural banks, which provided seeds and fertilisers, and water was available via the Euphrates River and irrigation canals. However, with the onset of drought and worsening conditions during the siege after 2011, these resources dwindled. The regime prevented the supply of seeds and fertilisers on the pretext of the presence of armed factions, and a policy of monopoly took hold. Last year, farmers lost almost their entire maize crop because the relevant authorities did not purchase the crop at a fair price and did not allow it to be exported*."
She adds:
"*Over the last ten years, some farmers have begun to shift towards crops that are more drought-tolerant and require less water, but these solutions remain limited*."

She also points to the direct impact of hardline armed groups on women's agricultural labour:
"*The period of ISIS control had a severe impact on women. The group imposed strict restrictions on women's movement and dress, requiring them to be accompanied by a male guardian from their family. In rural areas, women were accustomed to working in the fields from early morning, but these restrictions disrupted agricultural work. Furthermore, the imposed dress code, particularly the heavy black abaya, exacerbated suffering in the face of extreme heat, prompting many to stop working in the fields and confine themselves to domestic work*."

In contrast, in the countryside around Salamiyah, which remained under central state control throughout the years of war, a different picture emerges.

The issue here was not the absence of the state, but its gradual transformation into hollow institutional structures, within which networks of militias, war profiteers, and beneficiaries of the conflict economy expanded. As a result, the capacity of formal institutions to manage agricultural resources and respond to drought challenges declined significantly, in what can be described as a breakdown of agricultural and environmental governance.
Within this context, farming communities were largely left to confront the effects of drought and declining production without effective support policies or adaptation programmes.

Photo credit: New Lines Magazine

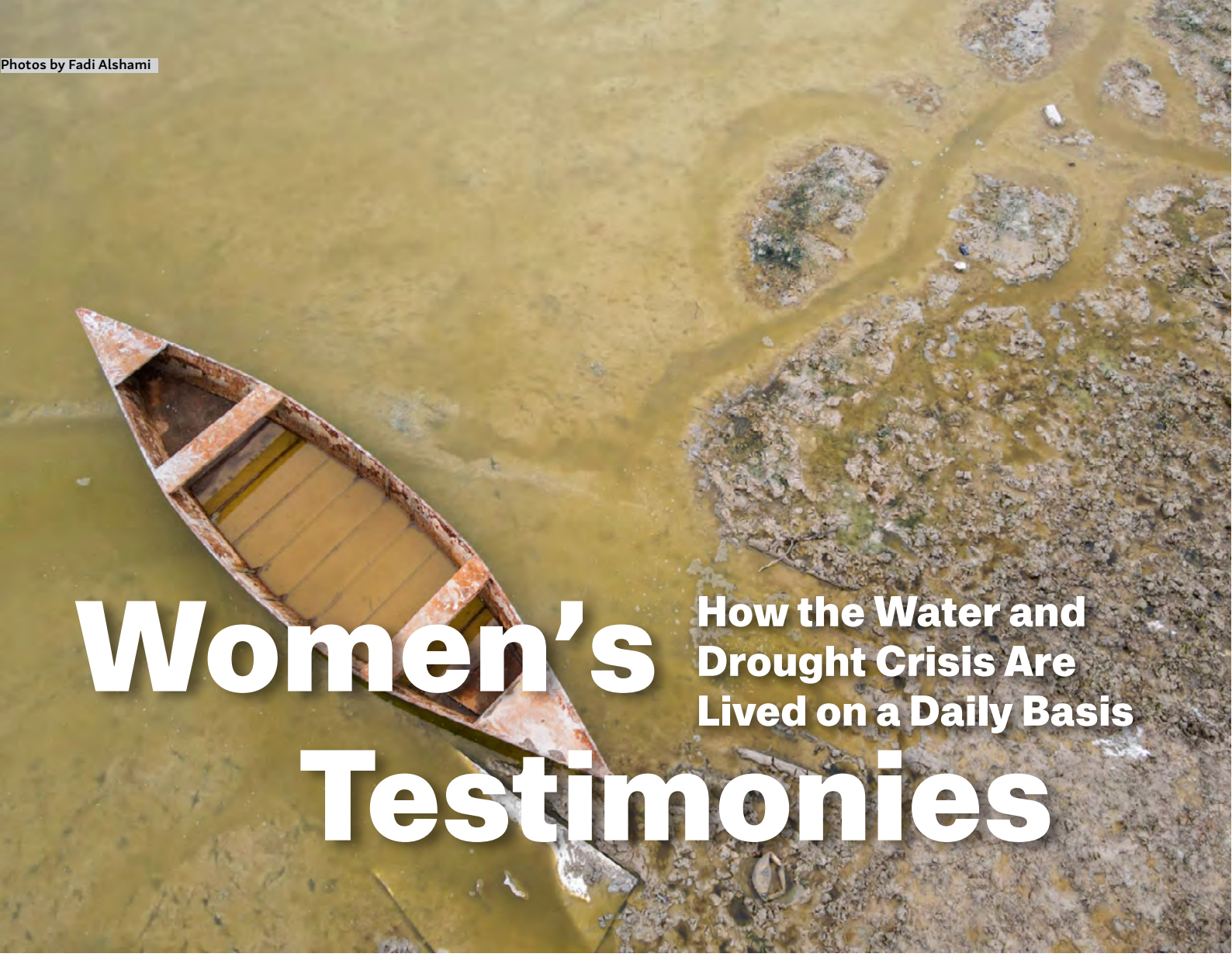
Asma Zain (a pseudonym), from the town of Tal al-Durra, had long been tied to the land before she was forced to shift to sewing work under the pressure of drought and the absence of compensation and support programmes for farmers. She explains: "*The war had a direct impact on the land and security. There was a military post near our land, and theft and the felling of trees for heating became widespread. During the olive harvest, quantities amounting to as much as a third of the season's yield were stolen, often under the cover of security forces. Since the fall of the regime, thefts have continued, and this affects people's ability to work on their land.*"

Across Idlib, Raqqa, and Salamiyah, forms of authority differ, as do patterns of resource management and access to land and water. Nevertheless, the outcomes converge: more fragile land, communities less able to adapt, and women who are targeted, unprotected, and disproportionately burdened with managing scarcity in everyday life.

This disproportionate burden is also evident within agricultural labour. Syrian women participate extensively in agriculture, whether on family land or through seasonal work in harvesting and production. However, this labour often remains economically invisible, as many women work in unpaid family labour or in low-paid agricultural jobs under informal conditions that lack adequate protections for wages, social welfare, and labour safeguards. In this context, climate vulnerability intersects not only with gender but also with the structural inequities of agricultural labour itself.

This pattern of exploitation is not limited to Syria, but is also evident among Syrian women working in agriculture in host countries, where many face low wages, long working hours, and precarious conditions reflecting the intersection of poverty, gender-based vulnerability, and displacement, and compounding the forms of economic exploitation experienced by women in this sector.

Consequently, scarcity in war-affected agricultural environments does not appear solely as a resource crisis, but as invisible, unpaid daily labour borne by women within households and communities. As agricultural production declines and the costs of water and energy rise, women are often compelled to reorganise daily life around fewer resources: managing water, reducing consumption, finding alternatives for food and energy, and sustaining family life despite shrinking incomes.



Photos by Fadi Alshami

Women's Testimonies

How the Water and Drought Crisis Are Lived on a Daily Basis

The following testimonies offer three complementary perspectives on the water and energy crisis as experienced on the ground, through the lives of women in different contexts: Masyaf and rural Salamiyah, and the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo in the northeast.

These accounts do not merely describe scarcity as an abstract concept; rather, they bring it into the realm of everyday detail: the timing of water and electricity supply, the resulting interruptions to work and daily obligations, and the impacts on household tasks, hygiene, neighbourly relations, health, as well as agricultural and rural labour. As such, these testimonies are not presented simply as illustrative examples, but as material that reveals how the crisis becomes embedded in the rhythm of daily life and the practical conditions of survival.

Photo by Delil SOULEIMAN / AFP for Getty Images

These transformations are clearly reflected in the testimony of *Nora Mohammed (a pseudonym),* a community activist who describes how access to water and electricity becomes an event that forces the immediate reorganisation of the day, generating tensions linked to usage, cost, and the ability to secure alternatives.

She also points to the failure of some wells in recent years due to a lack of maintenance and administrative neglect. She explains:
"*At first, the signs of drought were not as evident as they are today. However, in recent years, especially last summer, it became very clear. Some wells went out of service, sometimes due to lack of maintenance, and sometimes due to administrative neglect. When the most basic necessities of life, water and electricity, are unavailable, the day turns into a constant race against time. If water arrives, you have to drop everything and rush home to fill tanks and containers. If electricity comes, you have to make the most of the time to run the washing machine, heat water, or get household tasks done. Sometimes I am at the institute when I receive a call that water has arrived, and I have to rush back immediately. The same applies to electricity. This constant exhaustion was one of the most psychologically and physically draining periods of our lives.*"

She adds:
"*Women bear the greatest burden under these conditions. Men may sometimes help by operating a generator or carrying heavy containers, but the daily management of water, electricity, and household affairs remains the woman's responsibility. This created tensions within households: disputes over bathing, water consumption, or the cost of purchasing water tankers. In some homes, people refrained from bathing for several days when water was unavailable because they could not afford to buy it. Tensions also extended between neighbours: accusations of water theft, of installing powerful pumps that draw water from the network, or of disputes over generator use. These were real, everyday problems.*"

However, the impact of the water crisis extends beyond disruption, affecting agricultural labour and the rural economy. In agriculture-dependent areas, drought and declining groundwater levels lead to longer hours of physical labour under harsh climatic conditions, alongside reduced agricultural output and increasing economic pressure.

Image: ABDULAZIZ KETAZ/AFP/Getty Images

These transformations are evident in the testimony of ***Asma Zeno (a pseudonym)*** from Tal al-Durra, a town in rural Salamiyah.

She describes the shift from vegetable farming, which requires regular irrigation, to rain-fed agriculture, along with declining production, recurring heatwaves affecting crops, and the emergence of new plant diseases. She also explains how this transition affected working hours and family life:

"*The work was physically demanding and direct; I was involved in planting, ploughing, and caring for the crops. But production was very low and did not meet the family's needs. Later, as the drought intensified and the wells dried up, we had to change our farming pattern. We could no longer grow vegetables because they required regular irrigation, so the land shifted to rain-fed agriculture, such as wheat and barley.*

There was no government support to compensate for this shift or to support farmers. Crops began to be clearly affected by climate change. In the summer, heatwaves would scorch the blossoms or grain at sensitive stages, significantly reducing yields. New plant diseases emerged that we were not familiar with before, and they worsened with extreme heat. These phenomena were not common in the past but have become increasingly frequent."

She adds:

"*The agricultural work period was one of the most difficult stages of my life. I would go to the land at dawn, return in the morning, then go back in the afternoon under intense heat and return around sunset, about ten hours of work per day. I would leave my young children with my husband's family. This constant exhaustion affected my family life; I was unable to give my children the care they deserved, and the pressure created tension between my husband and me. As living pressures increased, so did the problems. There were arguments and, at times, verbal violence. But I believe that the way a family deals with a crisis determines whether it will hold together or fall apart. I tried to remain calm and postpone discussions during moments of heightened tension. I believe that women bear greater pressures and are often more capable of adapting and maintaining balance in life*."

Meanwhile, Rohlat al-Sheikh (a pseudonym), from Qamishli/Qamishlo, worked for several years in community diplomacy before dedicating herself to environmental and feminist work.

She is involved in the management, planning, and implementation of field-based environmental initiatives, including seed collection campaigns, seedling propagation, reforestation, and environmental awareness-raising. Her testimony highlights the difficulty of securing water, the reliance on wells or purchased tanker water, and the health impacts of using unsafe sources. She also points to the political dimension of the crisis, particularly the impact of dam and irrigation projects on shared rivers, declining water levels, and the resulting drying of tributaries, which has forced villages to depopulate or decline. She explains:

"*Our region suffers from significant difficulty in securing water. We either depend on groundwater wells or purchase water from tankers. When electricity is available, we can pump water from wells; otherwise, we are forced to buy it. Water shortages have intensified drought and led to the spread of disease due to the use of unsafe sources and unsterilised transport methods.*"

She adds:

"*In addition to climate change, political factors have played a decisive role. The cutting off of water from the Turkish side as a result of the dam and irrigation projects has had a direct impact on our region. Water has become a tool of political conflict, and international agreements are no longer respected as they should be. The levels of shared rivers have dropped significantly, and only a small amount now reaches us. There used to be hundreds of tributaries, but they have dried up, and entire villages have been depopulated because their livelihoods depended on river-based agriculture*."

Taken together, these testimonies reveal that the crisis is not experienced at a single level, but across multiple domains: within the home, in work and mobility, in fields and production, in public health and local environments, and in the relationship between resources and broader political contexts. These experiences provide a crucial entry point for understanding how war, institutional corruption, governance decline, and a lack of transparency intersect to produce scarcity and reshape access to water and energy, an issue further examined in the following section.

Water as a Nexus of Power and Scarcity in the Context of War

The testimonies collected in this study reveal a clear convergence around two central axes: water and electricity. Although participants also spoke about drought, rising temperatures, agricultural decline, and economic collapse, the water and energy crisis remained the most prominent element in their accounts of daily experience and its direct effects on everyday life. Nevertheless, what these testimonies reveal cannot be reduced to a simple shortage of resources or to service disruption. The crisis appears not only in dwindling resources but also in the reshaping of the very rhythm of daily life.

Access to water becomes intermittent and unpredictable, and the day is reorganised around it: the timing of cooking, washing, bathing, cleaning the house, storing water, and postponing other tasks while waiting for it to arrive. In this sense, water management is no longer merely a technical or domestic matter; it becomes part of an entire way of life shaped by the pressure of scarcity.
The testimonies confirm that women are the primary actors in this daily management, whether by monitoring tanks, carrying water, arranging its purchase, redistributing its use within the family, or adapting to repeated interruptions in water and electricity supplies. Within this context, distinct gender roles take shape within the family and community. Women, particularly mothers, pregnant women, and female heads of household, become what might be described as the household's "primary managers of scarcity": waiting, carrying containers, storing water, rationing its use, and setting priorities among drinking, hygiene, and cooking, while also managing the daily tensions that scarcity generates within the family or between neighbours.
This invisible labour consumes not only money, but also time, physical strength, and emotional endurance. Long hours are taken away from work, education, or rest; repeated physical effort is expended on carrying and storing water; and all this is accompanied by constant exhaustion linked to the fear that water may run out or electricity may fail at a critical moment.

Water as a Nexus of Power and Scarcity in the Context of War

The effects of this strain are not limited to physical fatigue; they also extend to mental health and the ability to maintain daily balance. **Here, the analytical framing offered by Rima Fleihan, Executive Director of the Syrian Feminist Lobby and a psychotherapist, helps illuminate the relationship between the erosion of basic needs and the deterioration of psychological and social equilibrium**.

According to Maslow's hierarchy, physiological needs such as food and water form the foundation on which all other human needs rest. When these basic needs are not met, a person's concern for higher-level needs such as safety, belonging, and self-actualisation declines, as attention shifts primarily to survival and the securing of daily necessities. The literature also indicates that food insecurity is a significant source of psychological and social stress and is associated with higher rates of depression and psychological distress, as well as symptoms of anxiety and declining general health and psychological well-being.

In addition, deprivation of adequate food and basic care requirements may negatively affect emotional balance and daily behaviour, including mood instability, heightened tension, confusion, and a reduced ability to adapt socially. Some studies show that the effects of food insecurity may be particularly severe for certain groups, especially women and children, in terms of the accompanying psychological and social burden. Depression, moreover, is inversely associated with self-care, including personal hygiene and attention to appearance, which may intensify feelings of withdrawal and stigma and contribute to the continuation and worsening of psychological suffering.

Within this framework, adaptation to the crisis no longer appears as a mere survival strategy; rather, it becomes a form of continuous attrition within everyday life. Adaptation itself thus becomes a form of structural violence: an ongoing depletion that presses upon bodies and reshapes relationships within the family and community under the logic of scarcity. Crises do not affect everyone equally; rather, they produce inequalities formed at the intersection of gender with class, location, age, and health status. The poorest households, or those living in rural and marginalised areas, face greater burdens in securing water and energy, while women in these settings bear the largest share of this daily strain. This burden affects not only material living conditions but also intensifies tensions within the family and weakens the capacity for psychological and social adaptation to recurring crises.

For this reason, water does not appear in these testimonies merely as an environmental resource, but as a relation of power in which politics, war, and economics intersect. During the years of conflict, water and energy infrastructure became a direct arena of struggle: supplies were cut off, services were disrupted, distribution was inequitably controlled, and access to resources was tied to influence, purchasing power, or local domination. Scarcity, then, is no longer simply the result of climate change or dwindling natural resources; it also stems from policies, conflicts, and fragmented modes of governance.

In the context of the continuing decline of public governance, scarcity gradually shifts from a matter of public services to an open market managed through intermediaries, tanker suppliers, fluctuating prices and costly individualised alternatives, in the absence of effective oversight of distribution and quality. These transformations are clearly reflected in the participants' testimonies, which describe buying water despite its poor quality, enduring constant rationing because of cost, and the disparity between those who own a well or an energy source and those who do not. Here, the water and energy

crisis appears not only as a matter of absolute scarcity, but also as one of unjust management and distribution. Scarcity does not disappear with the ebbing of active fighting; rather, it takes on a new form. It shifts from being a direct instrument of war to what may be described as an ***"economy of scarcity,"*** one that reproduces violence in everyday life through the continual depletion of time, money, and effort, often at the expense of women, who bear the greatest burden of managing this collapse within both the household and the field. In this sense, the water crisis in Syria is not simply a crisis of resources or infrastructure, but a relation of power that determines who has access to resources and who is excluded from them. Control over water and energy thus becomes part of the political economy of both the war and the transitional period alike.

In this context, the persistence of unjust resource governance, the expansion of the shadow economy and opaque economic deals, and the marginalisation of women from decision-making positions all intersect with an increasingly prominent official and diplomatic discourse on climate and gender equality. This raises a broader question of whether climate discourse itself may be used to reproduce political legitimacy rather than serve as an entry point for addressing the structural causes of environmental and social vulnerability.

> ***Adaptation itself becomes a form of structural violence— an ongoing depletion that presses upon bodies and restructures social relations under conditions of scarcity***

Climate as a Tool for Rebuilding Political Legitimacy

Between International Commitments and the Reality of Power

In recent years, climate policies have become an increasingly important component of international diplomacy and a key instrument for states to build political legitimacy. Climate conferences and environmental agreements are no longer merely platforms for discussing environmental issues; they have also evolved into political arenas through which states reposition themselves as active actors and partners in addressing global challenges, including climate change.

> ***"Achieving climate justice requires strengthening women's participation and integrating a gender perspective into policies"***

In this context, Syria's participation in the international climate regime can be understood within broader political dynamics that extend beyond the immediate environmental dimension. Since it acceded to the Paris Agreement in 2017, the Syrian state has maintained a presence within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), despite the political isolation it has faced in other international arenas.

This presence re-emerged at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP30, held in Belém, Brazil, in 2025, where the Syrian transitional government participated as authorities sought to rebuild international relations and attract funding for reconstruction and climate adaptation.

During this conference, the international community adopted the Belém Gender Action Plan (2025–2034), which emphasises that achieving climate justice requires strengthening women's participation in decision-making related to natural resource management, integrating a gender perspective into national climate policies, and developing transparent mechanisms for managing climate finance in ways that reach communities most affected by environmental crises.

However, examining Syria's engagement in light of the country's institutional realities raises fundamental questions about the relationship between international commitments and domestic policies. In the period following the political transition, many institutions responsible for managing natural resources

Climate as a Tool for Rebuilding Political Legitimacy

Image : Igor Mota/ZUMA/picture alliance C30.

continue to operate within the same administrative structures formed during the years of war. To date, no deep institutional reforms have emerged in key sectors linked to climate policy, such as water, agriculture, and energy. Administrative structures in these sectors remain highly centralised, with a significant lack of mechanisms for community participation and independent oversight, and the near-total exclusion of women from decision-making positions.

Against this backdrop of the contradiction between international discourse and local institutional realities, Syria's participation in climate conferences can be interpreted within a broader political context that extends beyond environmental policy.

While climate agreements open the door to substantial financial flows in areas such as climate adaptation, resource management, and renewable energy, the management of these resources within the country remains tied to the political and economic structures formed during the war and reproduced in the transitional phase.

From this perspective, this section proceeds on the premise that climate discourse may, in certain contexts, be used as a tool for reproducing political legitimacy, which may be described as political "greenwashing" through climate engagement.
In the current Syrian context, this contradiction can be understood through three interrelated dimensions that reveal how entrenched patterns of power persist within the emerging discourse of climate action:

1.The continued prevalence of gender-based violence and impunity.

2.The ongoing weaponisation of essential services such as water, electricity, food, and healthcare and their use as tools of political control.

3.The reproduction of the shadow economy and corruption networks in resource management, alongside the exclusion of women from decision-making positions and their symbolic inclusion to reinforce external legitimacy.

The Persistence of Gender-Based Violence Undermines Climate Justice

It is not possible to speak of climate justice in Syria without addressing the question of protection. In the period following the formation of the transitional authority, the overall environment for women remains highly insecure, with recurring patterns of gender-based violations occurring in the absence of clear pathways for justice or accountability.

Human rights, media, and UN reports have documented multiple forms of gender-based crimes during this period, including sexual violence, rape, enforced disappearance, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation.
An investigation published by Reuters on a wave of disappearances and abductions affecting women and girls from the Alawite community in 2025 reported demands for ransom payments, alongside indications of stalled official investigations and public discourse that downplays such cases or reframes them outside the context of violence.

> *"Violence against women is shaped by conflict and impunity."*

In parallel, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) experts have warned of attacks targeting Druze communities in southern Syria, particularly in Sweida and surrounding areas, including reports of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, as well as killings, looting, and enforced disappearances.

These incidents indicate that gender-based violence does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it intersects with political and sectarian divisions and the absence of institutional accountability, turning women's bodies into an additional site where conflict-related violence is enacted. These incidents should not be interpreted as isolated security events, but as a foundational layer that determines who can participate in public life and who is pushed out of it. When women face serious threats through abduction, violence, intimidation, or the absence of legal protection, they also lose access to livelihoods, and access to land, water, and agricultural labour becomes increasingly dangerous.

The testimonies presented in this paper illustrate how fear translates into withdrawal from fields, disruption of harvesting, farming, and water collection, and, ultimately, loss of income and reduced household resilience in the face of drought, heat, and rising energy costs.

***Reham Obeid (a pseudonym),* a feminist activist from Salamiyah, emphasises that security remains the primary concern for both women and men in her area. She explains**:
"Even after the change in authority, fear has not disappeared; it has only changed in form and source. Armed groups are still present in the surrounding areas, and theft and vandalism continue at times. No one feels safe enough to stay overnight on their land as they used to. Women, in particular, live in constant fear of abduction, which has altered many social behaviours that were once considered normal."

Alongside direct gender-based crimes, another pattern of policies has emerged that effectively constrains women's participation in public life. Since the current authorities assumed power, administrative and regulatory measures have significantly restricted the work of feminist organisations and civil society groups within the country.

Many organisations have been compelled to alter their identity or name if it included terms such as "feminist," "gender," or "gender justice" as a prerequisite for obtaining legal registration. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has imposed further restrictions on the registration and activities of associations, including requirements to obtain prior security and political approvals from relevant authorities before carrying out any public activity.

Within this restrictive regulatory environment, the work of feminist organisations and women's rights initiatives is subject to stringent institutional and security oversight, limiting their ability to operate independently or to contribute meaningfully to public debates on social and economic policy.

Hanadi Saleh (a pseudonym), founder and director of a feminist organisation in rural western Aleppo that was forced to change its name, describes these challenges:
"We faced many challenges as a feminist organisation, especially when we tried to register in Syria. We were required to change the organisation's name, replacing the word 'feminist' with 'women's' for the registration to be approved."

Climate as a Tool for Rebuilding Political Legitimacy

She adds:
"The issue did not stop at changing the name. The Directorate of Social Affairs and Labour also required us to adopt standardised templates for the internal bylaws, administrative structure, and overall organisational framework, leaving us with little more than filling in our own information while adhering to their prescribed model. These templates restrict our decision-making as organisation leaders and limit our ability to make independent decisions without government interference."
She further notes:
"Although the constitutional declaration guarantees equality and freedom of civil work, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has issued several decisions that contradict this declaration and require us to comply with them. This restricts communication among civil society organisations and imposes interference in their internal decision-making."

> ***"We were forced to change the organization's name and replace the word 'feminist' with 'women's' in order for the registration to be accepted."***

In this context, gender-based violence is no longer a standalone human rights issue separate from resource policies or environmental crises. Rather, it becomes embedded within a broader patriarchal and male-dominated political structure that produces an environment hostile to feminism and gender equality, and determines who is able to participate in managing climate crises and who is excluded. When the space for feminist organisations is restricted, when discourse on gender equality is curtailed, and when women are pushed out of public life through fear, violence, and institutional control, discussions about women's inclusion in climate policy or natural resource management become disconnected from the social and political realities in which such participation is supposed to occur.

As a result, the principles affirmed by international agreements on gender justice and community participation, such as those outlined in the Belém Gender Action Plan, are reduced to mere formal commitments that are difficult to implement in contexts that do not ensure free participation, protection, or accountability.

Under such conditions, calls to integrate women into climate adaptation policies lose their meaning as long as structures of impunity persist. **Climate justice cannot be achieved under a system that produces scarcity and redistributes it through violence, fear, and exclusion. When women are forcibly confined to the private sphere and excluded from public life, they are simultaneously excluded from political representation, from decision-making over water, energy, and agriculture, and from the right to participate in rebuilding life on equitable foundations.**

The Continued Weaponisation of Essential Services in the Context of Climate Crises

The weaponisation of essential services and basic needs in Syria is not limited to the earlier years of the conflict; there are clear indications that this pattern persists in the current phase as well. In cases such as the sieges imposed on Syrian cities like Sweida and Kobani, residents have faced prolonged restrictions on access to essential resources, including water, energy, food, and medicine.
In such contexts, the deprivation of services is not merely an incidental consequence of the crisis but a political instrument used to exert pressure on and subjugate local communities.

However, these policies cannot be understood solely in terms of their political or military dimensions. When sieges and supply disruptions occur in a context marked by escalating extreme climate events such as floods or severe snowstorms, their impact is compounded on the most vulnerable groups in society. When water and energy are cut off, or when access to food and medical supplies is restricted during periods of climatic stress, harm is not distributed equally. Women, particularly pregnant and breastfeeding women, those with chronic illnesses, or those lacking social support networks, find themselves bearing the brunt of the crisis. The daily responsibility for securing food, water, and healthcare often falls on women within the household, meaning that the effects of siege and climate-related disasters are directly embodied in their physical well-being and daily burdens.

In this sense, policies of siege and service disruption are not merely political tools; they become a form of structural violence that redistributes harm within society along lines of gender, class, and social vulnerability. Yet these impacts are rarely incorporated into international discussions on climate justice or into accountability mechanisms linked to international environmental agreements.

Climate as a Tool for Rebuilding Political Legitimacy

Doris Awad, **an expert in climate justice and local governance whose work focuses on the intersection of environmental justice and gender justice as well as transitional justice pathways in Syria, highlights this contradiction. Her work centres on analysing natural resource management, particularly water and energy, and its relationship to power structures, local participation, and reconstruction. She has also contributed to policy discussions on integrating climate justice into the transitional phase and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. She explains:**
"Climate justice is not merely an environmental issue; it is a matter of rights and social justice. It is linked to the distribution of resources, water, energy, and land and to who bears the burdens and who has the capacity to adapt. Women often bear a greater burden because they are in positions of social and economic vulnerability, and because crises are translated into the spaces of the home, work, and care."

> ***"Climate justice is not merely an environmental issue; it is a matter of rights and social justice."***

Awad **further emphasises that integrating climate considerations into political transition contexts is not optional, but essential for any meaningful justice process:**
"Transitional justice is not limited to politics alone; it includes redress, accountability, institutional reform, and reconstruction. If we ignore climate and resources at this stage, we are reproducing the same injustices, especially for women."
In the absence of such integration within international policy frameworks, states can continue to use resources and essential services as tools of internal pressure while presenting themselves on global platforms as actors committed to climate action. ***Awad*** **also points out that the structure of the international climate regime itself enables this contradiction:**
"The Paris Agreement is sound in theory, but in practice it is not decisive, as it relies largely on voluntary commitments. Major polluting countries wield significant influence and can circumvent or delay their obligations. Therefore, we cannot rely on agreements alone; we need binding mechanisms, accountability frameworks, and real financing for adaptation, loss, and damage."

From this perspective, treating climate as an environmental issue detached from politics or governance is insufficient. When climate disasters intersect with siege policies and service disruption, climate becomes a multiplier of social harm, while political responsibility for that harm remains largely beyond the scope of international accountability.

Reproducing the Shadow Economy and Corruption in Resource Management

Resource policies in Syria today cannot be understood in isolation from the economic structure that emerged during the years of war. With the collapse of public institutions and the weakening of oversight, extensive networks of the shadow economy developed, closely tied to centres of political and military power. These networks gradually came to dominate key sectors such as energy, water, food supplies, and cross-border trade. As the balance of power shifted throughout the conflict, these networks did not disappear; rather, they reconstituted themselves within the new economic structure.

Investigative reporting and international analyses indicate that the Syrian economy is currently undergoing a process of reorganisation led by actors closely connected to political decision-making centres. In a 2025 Reuters investigation into the restructuring of the Syrian economy, the report highlighted the role of influential figures within the power structure in reorganising key economic sectors, including trade, energy, and public services, through opaque economic networks directly linked to political authority.

These developments raise growing concerns that economic reconstruction is being carried out according to a logic of redistributing influence, rather than through an institutional reform process grounded in transparency and accountability.
This pattern reproduces economic dynamics that closely resemble those formed under the previous regime, in which the management of public resources, including water, energy, and infrastructure, was tied to local and international corruption networks benefiting from opaque economic environments and weak accountability mechanisms. In such contexts, essential resources are transformed into sites of profit within a shadow economy based on informal deals, monopolies, and intermediaries.

The risks associated with this structure are not limited to the continuation of previous patterns of exploitation; they also extend to new resources emerging in the post-war phase. As international support programs expand in areas such as renewable energy, water management, and infrastructure rehabilitation, there is a growing risk that funding allocated to climate and environmental adaptation projects may be diverted toward power-linked

Climate as a Tool for Rebuilding Political Legitimacy

al-Hasakeh city, northeast Syria, May 8, 2023. © 2023 Human Rights Watch

economic networks, particularly in the absence of transparent governance and institutional oversight mechanisms.

In this context, natural resources are no longer framed as environmental or service-related issues, or even as shared national assets. Instead, they become embedded within a broader political economy centred on the redistribution of privilege within a narrow circle of power and beneficiaries. Water, energy, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction projects are thus transformed into instruments for reproducing political and economic influence, rather than serving as entry points for rebuilding equitable public institutions that can manage resources efficiently and sustainably.

From this perspective, discussions of climate justice in Syria cannot be separated from the question of economic governance. Projects related to water, energy, and agriculture -sectors most closely tied to climate adaptation policies- can either become tools for rebuilding more equitable public institutions or new resources that reinforce the shadow economy and reproduce the same inequalities that have deepened climate vulnerability from the outset. For this reason, any discussion of climate policy in Syria cannot be limited to the technical dimensions of environmental adaptation. It must also include a critical examination of the economic structures through which resources are managed. Without genuine institutional reform that ensures transparency and accountability, climate initiatives risk becoming a new channel for reproducing the political economy of war under the guise of development and climate adaptation.However, analysing the relationship between climate and power in the Syrian context cannot stop at diagnosing these structures alone.

If scarcity is managed within networks of power and a political economy shaped by years of conflict, then addressing its consequences cannot remain a purely technical matter of resource management or climate adaptation. The environmental and climate-related harm accumulated during the conflict, from the destruction of water and energy infrastructure to land contamination and the spread of polluting energy practices, is directly linked to the political and economic structures that produced it. Accordingly, incorporating these harms into transitional justice processes becomes essential not only from the perspective of environmental recovery but also in terms of accountability, redress, and institutional reform.

In this context, the following question emerges: how can transitional justice processes in Syria address environmental and climate-related harm as part of the legacy of war, and contribute to rebuilding the relationship between society and natural resources on more just and sustainable foundations?

Transitional Justice and Climate Justice

Accountability foar Environmental Harm and Rebuilding the Conditions of Life

Transitional justice is often discussed in post-conflict contexts as a framework for addressing grave political and security violations, such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and other forms of direct violence. However, the experience of war in Syria reveals that violence has not been limited to these violations; it has extended to the material conditions of life itself.

The targeting of infrastructure, the destruction of agricultural land, the contamination of soil and water, and the weaponisation of essential services such as water and electricity have produced long-term environmental and social harm that now intersects with accelerating climate change, further deepening the vulnerability of local communities. In this sense, environmental harm in Syria cannot be understood as a secondary byproduct of war, but rather as part of the material structure of violence that has targeted the very conditions of life.

From this perspective, transitional justice cannot be reduced to accountability for direct political violence alone. It must also encompass recognition of the environmental and climate-related harm caused by the war. Environmental degradation in Syria is not merely a natural consequence of conflict; it is part of a wider framework of structural violence that has reshaped the relationship between society and natural resources, undermined livelihoods, and weakened communities' capacity to adapt to escalating climate crises.

> ***Environmental harm in Syria cannot be understood as a secondary byproduct of war, but rather as part of the material structure of violence.***

Doris Awad, an expert in climate justice and local governance, underscores this interconnection, emphasising that climate justice is inseparable from social justice, as it relates to the distribution of resources, who bears the burdens and who has the capacity to adapt. She further argues that ignoring the environmental dimensions of the war's legacy within transitional justice processes risks reproducing the same patterns of injustice that deepened social vulnerability during the conflict.

This harm is not confined to environmental destruction; it is also embodied within human bodies. Pollution resulting from munitions remnants, informal oil refining, the use of unsafe water sources, and the deterioration of sanitation systems has led to increasing health impacts across many Syrian regions, including the spread of respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, and recurrent health problems in areas most exposed to contamination. These effects are clearly reflected in the testimonies of women working in environments directly affected by such conditions.

Sahba al-Faraj (a pseudonym), who works with women in rural Raqqa and the Al-Jazira region, notes recurring observations of health issues linked to environmental pollution, including gynaecological and respiratory conditions, particularly in areas near informal oil-refining sites or where contaminated water is used for irrigation. She adds that such phenomena are rarely discussed within an environmental or climate framework and often remain unexplained due to insufficient medical and environmental studies, leaving many affected individuals unable to identify even the potential causes of their conditions.

The same testimony also points to recurring observations of increased cases of early puberty among girls in certain areas. While scientific research is increasingly documenting the impact of climate change and environmental factors on various aspects of women's reproductive health, including some indicators related to puberty and menstruation, the Syrian context still lacks sufficient independent studies directly linking rising temperatures to early puberty among girls.

This highlights the need for specialised medical, environmental, and social research that examines these phenomena within the context of war, pollution and service degradation, and explores the potential connections between heat, environmental stress, social transformations, reproductive health, and the timing of puberty. This issue acquires an additional social dimension when, as indicated in some testimonies, it is associated with increased social vulnerability and heightened risks of early marriage in contexts marked by economic collapse, service breakdown, and intensified restrictions on girls.

"This harm is not confined to environmental destruction; it is also embodied within human bodies."

The impacts of climate and environmental change do not stop at physical health; they also extend to social relations within the family and the community. Numerous studies have shown that rising temperatures and increasing economic pressures associated with resource scarcity can contribute to heightened tension and violence within households. In a context such as Syria, where climate crises intersect with the legacies of war and economic collapse, women and girls are often on the frontlines of these pressures.

In addition to environmental and health-related harm, the war has created a significant knowledge gap in understanding the environmental and climate impacts of the conflict. Years of war have not only destroyed natural resources and infrastructure but have also disrupted the production of independent scientific knowledge on environmental and climate issues. To date, there are insufficient studies assessing the long-term environmental impact of war remnants or of the intensive military operations carried out across Syrian territory, including the use of the country as a testing ground for various types of weapons. Climate change is often treated as a secondary issue or even a luxury compared to more immediate humanitarian and security crises, despite its direct impact on everyday living conditions and prospects for post-war recovery.

From this perspective, transitional justice raises a fundamental question regarding redress. While compensation programs often focus on direct material losses such as the destruction of homes or property, the harm inflicted on land, natural resources, and agricultural livelihoods is frequently excluded from these frameworks.

***Sanaa Saleh (a pseudonym),* a participant from rural Salamiyah whose experience is closely tied to rain-fed agriculture and to managing livelihood pressures related to water and energy, explains that justice, for many women, is not limited to the end of war, but also includes the ability to restore daily life, work, and participation in rebuilding society.** She states: "For us, justice is not only that the war ends, but that we can live with dignity and have a role in rebuilding society."

> ***"While compensation programs often focus on direct material losses such as the destruction of homes or property, the harm inflicted on land, natural resources, and agricultural livelihoods is frequently excluded from these frameworks."***

This testimony, like those of other women who have lived through war under severe climatic pressures, reflects a broader conception of justice that goes beyond ending direct violence to include rebuilding the conditions of life and dignity. Integrating climate justice into transitional justice processes, therefore, does not mean simply adding an environmental file to the political transition agenda. Rather, it entails recognising that rebuilding society after war requires accountability for environmental harm, redress for the degradation of land and livelihoods, reform of institutions responsible for managing water, energy, and agriculture, and the meaningful participation of women and local communities in decision-making over the resources that shape their future.

Moreover, integrating climate justice into the legal and constitutional framework of a future Syrian state constitutes a critical step to ensure that future environmental crises do not become a new source of reproduced inequality and gender-based violence. As the impacts of climate change in the region are expected to intensify in the coming decades, it becomes essential to develop laws and public policies that protect women and the most vulnerable groups from these effects, whether in health, labour, and access to natural resources.

"Moreover, integrating climate justice into the legal and constitutional framework of a future Syrian state constitutes a critical step to ensure that future environmental crises do not become a new source of reproduced inequality and gender-based violence."

In this sense, transitional justice in Syria cannot be confined to addressing the legacy of political violence alone; it must also confront the environmental legacy of war. Rebuilding sustainable peace requires rebuilding the very conditions of life, land, water, and energy on more just and sustainable foundations. However, recognition of this harm and accountability for it are not sufficient on their own to prevent its recurrence. The manner in which cities, infrastructure, and the economy are rebuilt after the war will play a decisive role in determining whether the post-conflict phase addresses the root causes of environmental and social vulnerability or reproduces them in new forms.

Reconstruction itself thus becomes both a political and environmental process, not merely a technical undertaking, but a pathway that determines how resources and power are distributed within society.

Reconstruction in the Context of Climate Justice

A Feminist Approach to Resource Management and Governance

Reconstruction in post-conflict contexts is often framed as a purely technical process aimed at rebuilding destroyed cities, repairing infrastructure, and stimulating the economy through attracting investment. However, this technical framing conceals a fundamental political question: who controls the resources required for reconstruction? Who sets reconstruction priorities? Moreover, how will access to water, energy, and land be reorganised after the war?

In the Syrian case, reconstruction cannot be separated from the profound transformations that have shaped resource management during the years of conflict. Access to water, energy, and land has been reconfigured through local networks of influence and shadow economies linked to military and political authority, within a predominantly patriarchal, male-dominated power structure. With the collapse of public service institutions and the decline of environmental and agricultural governance, essential resources such as water and energy have become arenas of political and economic competition and tools for redistributing influence within society.

> *"Who controls the resources required for reconstruction? Who sets reconstruction priorities?."*

In this context, reconstruction is not merely a process of repairing the material damage caused by the war; it represents a critical political moment in which the relationship between society, resources, and power is redefined. If reconstruction proceeds without accountability for the economic and political structures formed during the war, and without reforming resource management institutions, it risks becoming a new mechanism for redistributing privilege within the same patriarchal political and economic system that contributed to environmental and social vulnerability in the first place.

Transitional Justice and Climate Justice

Moreover, rebuilding destroyed cities and villages cannot take place in isolation from the accelerating climate transformations affecting the region. Rising temperatures, increasing drought cycles, and declining water resources all necessitate a rethinking of urban planning models, water management, energy systems, and agricultural practices. Rebuilding infrastructure according to the same models that relied on high consumption of water and energy and unregulated urban expansion risks reproducing climate vulnerability rather than addressing it. Reconstruction within a climate justice framework, therefore, entails more than rebuilding what has been destroyed; it requires redesigning the relationship between society and natural resources on more equitable and sustainable foundations. This includes developing climate-resilient infrastructure, improving water resource management, supporting drought-resilient agriculture, expanding the use of renewable energy sources, and rehabilitating land damaged by pollution and war remnants.

> ***"Reconstruction within a climate justice framework... requires redesigning the relationship between society and natural resources on more equitable and sustainable foundations."***

The testimony of *Abeer Hatem (a pseudonym)* illustrates this point clearly. A Syrian researcher and activist working on political participation and peacebuilding, she has experience in journalism and documenting issues of justice and public participation, and returned to Syria after the fall of the regime. She emphasises that the impact of climate on daily life is not determined by weather alone, but also by how cities and services are managed:

"In terms of climate, the natural conditions in Syria and Turkey may appear similar: hot summers and cold winters. However, the difference lies in how the state and the city manage services. In Turkey, I saw well-prepared housing, public services that mitigate the effects of heat and cold, clear municipal programmes for waste sorting and recycling, and institutional training to reduce waste. In Syria, by contrast, I do not see even the minimum level of such management. Green spaces are limited, and many trees are withering due to insufficient irrigation. In Aleppo, for example, only limited areas contain parks and trees, while the rest of the city suffers from a clear absence of greenery."

This testimony highlights that reconstruction is not only about rebuilding infrastructure and services, but also about the type of urban and environmental governance that will shape everyday life and the capacity to adapt to climate change. It also reveals that the lack of transparency in managing resources and services is as critical as the scarcity of resources themselves.

However, the environmental dimension of reconstruction cannot be separated from its social and gendered dimensions. International experience shows that reconstruction processes managed under authoritarian systems or patriarchal governance structures tend to reproduce existing inequalities rather than address them. In such contexts, resources and investments are redistributed in ways that reinforce the power of political and economic elites, while those most affected by the war, including women, remain excluded from decision-making positions.The testimonies in this paper demonstrate that women have been at the centre of managing environmental and livelihood crises throughout the years of war. They have played essential roles in agricultural work, in managing water and energy within households, and in organising limited resources within local communities. Yet women continue to be largely excluded from reconstruction planning processes and from decision-making positions related to natural resource management.

***Khawla Dunia,* coordinator of the Syrian Feminist Lobby in Syria and a trainer on gender issues, emphasises that natural resource management in post-conflict contexts represents a central arena for reshaping governance and power within society. She is currently working on a project focused on raising awareness of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), as well as on climate change and climate justice, with particular emphasis on linking climate justice to transitional justice, reconstruction, and legal and institutional reform. In this context, she stresses that water, energy, and agricultural projects are not merely technical initiatives, but policies that determine who has access to resources, who is excluded, and how the relationship between state and society is reconfigured in the post-war period.**

> ***"water, energy, and agricultural projects are not merely technical initiatives, but policies that determine who has access to resources, who is excluded"***

This perspective aligns with the testimonies presented in this paper, which clearly demonstrate how the management of scarce resources such as water and energy has become part of the political economy of war, and how women have borne the greatest burden of managing this scarcity within everyday life through invisible labour that compensates for the collapse of public services and the decline of agricultural and social policies. However, one dimension that remains largely absent from discussions of reconstruction in Syria is the gendered structure of the economy. To date, major investments in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, real estate, and reconstruction are concentrated within economic networks dominated by men, while women remain almost entirely excluded from positions of investment and economic decision-making in these sectors.

Transitional Justice and Climate Justice

This exclusion extends beyond ownership of major companies or large-scale investments to include sectors most closely tied to natural resource management, such as energy, water, and urban planning.
The absence of women from these domains reflects not only economic inequality, but also a structural flaw in the design of the reconstruction process itself.
Excluding women from investment sectors, urban planning, and resource management means that the policies shaping future cities, villages, and infrastructure are formulated within a male-dominated political and economic system that does not necessarily reflect society›s diverse social and environmental experiences.
In this context, integrating gender justice into reconstruction policies becomes a fundamental component of climate justice. Rebuilding infrastructure and mobilising investment without addressing gender inequalities in access to resources and economic decision-making risks reproducing the same power structures that contributed to environmental and social vulnerability from the outset.

Accordingly, reconstruction cannot be limited to a material process of rebuilding what the war has destroyed. It must also be understood as a process of rebuilding the social contract itself, reorganising the relationship between society, resources, and power on more equitable and sustainable foundations.
In this way, land, water, and energy would no longer serve as instruments of domination and violence but as shared resources managed to ensure social and environmental justice for future generations.
In light of the interconnections identified in this paper between environmental harm, structural violence, and resource management, the following recommendations are proposed as initial steps toward a form of climate justice grounded in accountability, redress, and guarantees of non-repetition.

"Reconst-ruction is not only a material process of rebuilding, but also a rebuilding of the social contract."

Recommendations

1 At the Level of Transitional Justice, Accountability, and Non-Recurrence

1.Ensure official and national recognition of the environmental and climate-related harm caused by the war in Syria as an integral part of the legacy of conflict and violations affecting the conditions of life, rather than treating it as a secondary effect or a separate technical issue.

2.Integrate environmental and climate-related harm into transitional justice processes, including mechanisms for accountability, redress, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition. This should involve expanding the concept of harm to include land, natural resources, agricultural livelihoods, and the health and social impacts resulting from pollution and the collapse of essential services.

3.Support accountability for environmental harm resulting from the use of weapons with wide-ranging impacts, as well as military and economic practices that contributed to the contamination of land, water, and air, and to the destruction of living conditions during the conflict, including any use of Syria as a site for military operations that exacerbated long-term environmental damage.

4.Develop a legal, constitutional, and legislative framework that ensures the protection of the environment and natural resources during times of conflict and war, clearly defines thresholds of severe environmental harm and environmental violations or crimes, and establishes environmental protection as a core guarantee of non-recurrence.

2 At the Level of Gender Protection and Public Policy

5.Develop effective laws and policies to protect women and girls in contexts of scarcity, climate crises, and post-conflict recovery, ensuring protection from violence, exploitation, and exclusion in environments affected by war, drought, and the collapse of essential services.

6.Integrate a gender-sensitive approach into disaster response and environmental crisis management plans, taking into account the impact of patriarchal and male-dominated structures on resource allocation, protection, and decision-making, and ensuring the meaningful participation of women in emergency bodies, risk management, and the distribution of resources and essential services.

3 At the Level of Feminist, Human Rights, and Environmental Organisations

7.Strengthen the role of feminist, human rights, and environmental organisations in monitoring the Syrian transitional authorities' compliance with international climate and gender commitments through independent periodic reporting that tracks the gap between official discourse and actual practice, particularly concerning gender justice, women's participation, transparency, accountability, and resource governance.

8.Support the development of feminist and environmental programmes grounded in the Syrian context, and avoid standardised or instrumental approaches that treat climate as a superficial entry point for funding or discourse without addressing the underlying political and economic structures that produce vulnerability.

9.Promote long-term, creative, and educational approaches to climate justice, including art, culture, research, and activities that target children and youth, in order to rebuild a healthy relationship with the environment and natural resources. This should include integrating environmental, climate, and social justice concepts into educational curricula from the earliest stages, fostering societal awareness that views climate not as a technical or seasonal issue but as a core component of life, dignity, and justice.

10. Encourage feminist organisations to frame climate justice as a matter of rights, social justice, and governance, linking it directly to issues of water, energy, agriculture, protection, violence, and political representation, while investing in building community awareness that redefines the relationship with land, nature, and climate through a feminist and social justice lens.

11. Strengthen collaboration among feminist, environmental, and transitional justice organisations to develop joint advocacy on environmental harm, accountability, redress, institutional reform, and the prevention of using water, energy, and essential services as tools of political coercion.

4 At the Level of Reconstruction, Economic Governance, and Resource Management

16. Approach reconstruction as a political, environmental, and social process that reorganises resources, power, and governance, not merely as an investment or engineering project, in order to prevent the reproduction of the same political and economic structures that deepened vulnerability during the war.

17. Ensure the meaningful inclusion of women in reconstruction and resource management processes by expanding women's access to decision-making, investment, and planning positions, and avoiding purely symbolic representation. This includes dismantling patriarchal and economic structures that have historically excluded women from sectors such as water, energy, urban planning, and disaster response, while requiring reconstruction plans to adhere to clear standards of transparency, oversight, and accountability, and preventing the use of water, energy, and essential services as tools of brokerage, monopoly, or political coercion.

5

At the Level of Environmental and Health Monitoring and Knowledge Production

12. Establish independent and comprehensive environmental monitoring programmes covering soil, air, water, polluted areas, and war remnants, in order to assess and document the extent of environmental damage and develop practical plans for its remediation.

13. Support independent medical and environmental research on the health impacts of pollution and climate change in Syria, with particular attention to issues raised in women's testimonies, including respiratory illnesses, chronic conditions, and reproductive health challenges. This should also include examining potential links among heat, pollution, environmental stressors, and related health and social phenomena, such as early puberty.

14. Allocate dedicated national and international funding to specialised medical and research teams, including women and men doctors and researchers capable of studying the environmental and health impacts of the war on women and girls, and linking research findings to public policy, accountability, and redress programmes.

15. Support the production of independent knowledge on the long-term environmental impacts of the war, including munitions remnants, informal oil refining, infrastructure destruction, and polluting energy practices, to move beyond treating climate as a secondary issue or a "luxury" compared to humanitarian and security concerns.

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