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Climate Change and Women in Northeast Syria: The Story No One Tells

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Drought conditions in the northern Syrian countryside, Lake District. Source: Charles Roffey via Flickr.

Northeast Syria under Kurdish self-administration, often referred to as Syria's 'food basket', holds strategic importance, not only for its oil reserves, but also for its rich agricultural production, including crops such as wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas, cotton, and cumin. However, beyond the consequences of war, the growing impacts of climate change have further deteriorated living conditions for women and girls in a region where most of the population relies on agriculture and

livestock herding for their livelihoods. At the time of writing, the region is experiencing extreme heat waves and widespread water scarcity due to prolonged drought. Women and girls, central to agricultural labour, **have been the hardest hit**.

Rain-fed agriculture, which dominates farming practices in Northeast Syria, has suffered complete failure this year, with 100% of the crops damaged due to a lack of rainfall and the accelerating effects of **climate change**. Even irrigated farming, once considered more resilient, has fallen far below expectations, hindered by limited fuel allocations and poor support from **local authorities**. As a result, the agricultural sector, an essential source of income for countless women and girls, has collapsed, pushing families deeper into economic hardship.

The Collapse of Farming and Livestock

Women and girls from some communities previously relied on agriculture and herding sheep to generate income, which has also deteriorated due to **the drought**. The drying up of rivers, many of which originate in Turkey, and the disappearance of **natural pastures**. The crisis is further exacerbated by Turkey's control over shared water sources through expansive dams' **construction**. Turkey has worsened the region's water crisis, reportedly to pressure Kurdish authorities in **the northeast** Syria. Years of conflict and environmental stress have forced families to abandon traditional livelihoods. In parallel, Turkish military attacks targeting oil fields, gas facilities, and power stations have severely disrupted access to water, affecting more than a million people in areas such as **Hasakah**. The Alouk Water Station, a primary source of water for over a million residents, has been repeatedly taken offline due to conflict. As a result, women and girls are forced to leave their homes to collect water from tankers, often walking long distances. Without clean water, they also face serious health risks, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth. In Hasakah, scenes of women and girls pleading with tanker drivers for water are not uncommon.

Early Marriage and Lost Education

Years of war and drought have pushed families to resort to early marriage as a survival strategy. With girls no longer able to contribute to the household economy through farming or herding, many families marry off their daughters, often while still minors, to ease their financial responsibilities, obtain dowries and reduce **financial burdens**. Increasingly, girls are being married off as second or third wives to much older men, particularly from Iraq. According to a report from Kurdish **Rudaw TV**, Iraqi brokers travel to Syria to find young brides, often in their early twenties, for older men in their fifties or sixties. Although no official figures exist, it's estimated that thousands of Syrian girls have entered such marriages. These brokers, paid by wealthy Iraqi men, exploit the desperate economic situation in Syria. Often driven by poverty, families see these marriages as an opportunity for financial relief and stability. The women and girls, especially the very young, are being sold into slavery disguised as marriage. The bride's dowry 'the money that the husband must pay to his wife

as one of the effects of the **marriage contract** typically around \$2,000, is a small amount for wealthy Iraqis but a significant sum for struggling Syrian families.

For many, these marriages are viewed as a form of protection or a chance at a better life, despite the risks and clear power imbalances. However, such arrangements often expose women and girls to physical, sexual, and **psychological abuse**. All these hardships have taken a toll on girls' education. Poverty, water scarcity, and the need to survive have forced many families to pull their daughters out of school.

Displacement and Armed Group Recruitment

As agricultural livelihoods continue to collapse due to climate change, rural life in Northeast Syria is undergoing a major transformation. With traditional income sources vanishing, many families have moved to urban areas. Men typically find work in construction, while women and girls increasingly exploited by armed groups due to their vulnerability by recruiting them instead of providing them with needed protection and **empowerment**. In addition, they are becoming increasingly involved in smuggling activities along the Syrian Iraqi and Syrian Turkish borders, these include transporting everyday items such as gas canisters, cheese, chicken, and sheep across borders to **support their families**. They often used by male smugglers to assist as scouts or diversions to evade military checkpoints. Many women involved in smuggling face sexual harassment and exploitation by border guards and smugglers. Some were drawn into human trafficking networks, smuggling people, mainly young men, fleeing conscription by hiding them within groups of women. Women have also been used to smuggle cigarettes and weapons, based on the assumption that they are less likely to be searched. To address the impact of climate change on women and girls in Northeast Syria, a multi-layered, inclusive approach is essential. First, local authorities must strengthen their support for women and girls, particularly in areas most affected by climate-related challenges. Both local and international actors (INGOs) should expand women-focused empowerment programs aimed at raising awareness, building resilience, improving livelihoods, and amplifying their voices in climate decision-making.

Local authorities should also enhance support for irrigated farming to help communities to adapt to water scarcity. Finally, with a new government in power and improved diplomatic ties with Turkey, Syria must pursue meaningful negotiations to secure a fairer share of water from transboundary rivers to address long-term water insecurity in regions like Hasaka, where women and girls are disproportionately affected.

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