



EVIDENCE BRIEF

Can economic and social support mitigate intimate partner violence, challenge harmful gender attitudes, and improve household welfare in Syria?

Evidence and lessons from the Building Local Resilience in Syria Violence Against Women and Girls prevention pilots

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Purpose and Scope:

This evidence brief offers insights, lessons and recommendations from Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) prevention impact evaluations. Pilot VAWG interventions were implemented as part of the Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) programme between 2023 and 2025 by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Homs and Rural Damascus and CARE and Mercy Corps through the Syria Resilience Initiative (SRI) in Al-Hasakah.

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Executive Summary

Syria's prolonged conflict has deepened poverty, food insecurity, and social strain. Women play a critical role in agriculture and household welfare but face persistent barriers to accessing resources and exercising their agency. Economic hardship, shifting gender roles, and entrenched patriarchal norms have increased risks of intimate partner violence (IPV), including economic IPV, where partners control resources, forbid employment, or refuse financial support. Understanding what works to prevent IPV, particularly economic IPV, in this context is both urgent and complex.

To address the challenges, the Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) Programme, funded by FCDO, piloted two projects providing economic support combined with couples' training curricula. The pilots aim to improve spousal communication, promote shared decision-making, and challenge harmful gender attitudes, with the goal of mitigating violence against women and girls (VAWG) and improving household economic outcomes. In one of the pilots, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) implemented an adapted version of Economic and Social Empowerment (EA\$E) programme in Homs and Rural Damascus. In the other pilot, CARE and Mercy Corps, under the Syria Resilience Initiative (SRI), implemented an adapted version of the *Indashyikirwa* programme in Al-Hasakah. Both projects were implemented between 2023 and 2025.

To evaluate these pilots, ISDC conducted cluster randomised controlled trials (cRCT) to assess whether adding couples' curricula to economic support improves wellbeing, fosters more positive spousal relations, reduces physical, emotional and economic IPV, and translates gains into meaningful economic outcomes in the short-term. The evaluations included 610 couples in Al-Hasakah with a pure randomisation cRCT and 581 couples in Homs and Rural Damascus with a restricted randomisation cRCT. This brief presents findings and recommendations relative to the BLRS programme strategy's guiding questions.

BLRS Core Question 1: Are women and girls exercising greater agency over their bodies and lives?

- The findings demonstrate partial gains in women's agency. In both pilots, women's shared decision-making improved. Improvements in women's wellbeing and relationship quality, and a reduction in daily domestic workload complemented these gains in Homs and Rural Damascus.
- Changes among men were limited, with little evidence of increased shared decision-making or domestic work in both pilots. However, men reported improved wellbeing and feeling cared for by their spouses in Homs and Rural Damascus.
- Continued and targeted programme efforts are needed to sustain these gains and ensure interventions benefit those most in need, including couples or members of couples with lower literacy or education, or disabilities, who were less likely to enrol in or complete the intervention.

BLRS Core Question 2: Is there greater support in targeted communities for women safely and sustainably accessing income generation?

- In Homs and Rural Damascus, reductions in IPV were likely linked to the intervention's stronger focus on intrahousehold economic cooperation, while in Al-Hasakah the greater emphasis on gender norms and attitudes was more effective in achieving attitudinal change, without further changes in behavioural outcomes.
- Men did not report reductions in economic IPV perpetration in either pilot. In Al-Hasakah, men were more likely to report spending money the household needed on themselves. While this change may reflect more accurate reporting rather than an increase in the perpetration of harmful behaviour, it also demonstrates the challenge in distinguishing shifts in behaviour versus reporting of sensitive topics. Further efforts are needed to identify what works to more effectively engage men.
- Together, findings highlight that different programme components can drive change through different pathways. Practical changes may reduce violence without fundamentally transforming underlying norms, while attitudinal shifts may not automatically translate into behavioural change, especially in the short-term. Longer timeframes would help determine the sustainability or emergence of additional impacts.

BLRS Core Question 3: Are beneficiaries, especially women, earning more income to help meet their basic needs?

- There is no strong evidence of short-term income gains. Such economic gains will likely take longer to materialise, particularly in fragile and volatile contexts such as Syria, where economic returns may be delayed.
- Several intermediate changes point to potential future economic gains through easing barriers to women's economic engagement: women reported improved wellbeing, greater participation in household decision-making, improved relationships with their husbands, and reductions in experiences of economic IPV. Both women and men held more equitable attitudes towards women's work outside the home.
- The lack of immediate economic effects points to an important consideration: social change on its own may not be enough to produce economic gains without sustained investment, supportive conditions, and sufficient time to allow impacts to emerge.

The BLRS pilots show that meaningful social change is possible even in fragile and gender inequitable environments such as Syria. Pairing economic support with efforts to address unequal power dynamics within households can begin to reduce violence and strengthen women's agency, creating the foundation for future economic participation, more resilient households, and sustained food security.

Tables of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Tables of Contents	5
List of acronyms	6
Introduction: The programme and policy context?	7
Building Local Resilience in Syria.....	7
Agro-processing vouchers and the Economic and Social Empowerment (EA\$E) curriculum	8
Cash transfers and the Indashyikirwa curriculum.....	8
Figure 1. Map of BLRS VAWG Prevention Evaluations.....	9
What are Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)?	9
What is economic violence?	9
Baseline Prevalence of IPV in the Syria BLRS pilot	10
Figure 2. Baseline economic intimate partner violence in Syria.....	10
What did we assess?	11
Figure 3. Simplified Theory of Change.....	11
Ethical considerations	11
Summary of findings	12
Table 1: Summary of overall findings for women and men by pilot.....	13
What did we learn?	14
What do we conclude?	16
References	18

List of acronyms

BLRS	Building Local Resilience in Syria
cRCT	Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial
DGS	Discussion Group Series
EA\$E	Economic and Social Empowerment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GBV	Gender-based violence
ISDC	International Security and Development Center
IPV	Intimate partner violence
SRI	Syria Resilience Initiative
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

Introduction: The programme and policy context?

More than a decade of conflict has left Syria facing profound economic, social, and political challenges. Infrastructure has been damaged, production and trade disrupted, and the currency weakened. Incomes have fallen, access to basic goods and services has become more difficult, and unemployment and extreme poverty have risen.^{1,2} At the same time, formal social protection systems have deteriorated, leaving vulnerable populations with limited support.¹ These crisis-related pressures, including insecurity, economic hardship, displacement, and social fragmentation, have deepened gendered inequalities and increased the risk of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

The crisis has particularly affected rural farming communities where women play a key role in agriculture, food production and processing, and household nutrition. In this context, discriminatory social norms and unequal gender roles have further limited women's access to assets, services, and employment. Furthermore, overlapping crisis-related pressures can heighten women's dependence on potential abusers, restrict mobility, and increase exposure to harmful coping strategies including early or forced marriage.^{3,4,5} At the same time, shifts in traditional power dynamics can undermine men's roles as providers. These changes coupled with increased financial tension contribute to increased risk of VAWG including intimate partner violence (IPV).^{3,6}

This brief first describes the Building Local Resilience in Syria (BLRS) programme and the two VAWG prevention pilots. It then introduces key concepts such as IPV and economic violence, presents baseline IPV prevalence estimates, and describes the evaluation approach. The final sections summarise the findings, discuss implications for programming and investment, and reflect on what the results mean for supporting women's safe and sustainable economic participation in Syria.

Building Local Resilience in Syria

The BLRS programme aims to reduce economic and social vulnerability and lessen humanitarian needs in targeted households and communities. By improving household welfare, strengthening resilience, and supporting local food systems, BLRS aims to help households and communities become more self-reliant and address harmful coping behaviours, child marriage, and VAWG.

The programme's approach to VAWG prevention, including economic IPV prevention ([Figure 1](#)), combines livelihood support with couples' curricula to promote healthy relationships, joint decision-making, and equitable gender attitudes within households and communities. Within its programming, the BLRS programme strategy identifies three core questions that guide its objectives and performance:

- **Core Question 1:** Are women and girls exercising greater agency over their bodies and lives?
- **Core Question 2:** Is there greater support in targeted communities for women safely and sustainably accessing income generation?
- **Core Question 3:** Are beneficiaries, especially women, earning more income to help meet their basic needs?

BLRS partners implemented the VAWG prevention pilots in three governorates in Syria.

Agro-processing vouchers and the Economic and Social Empowerment (EA\$E) curriculum

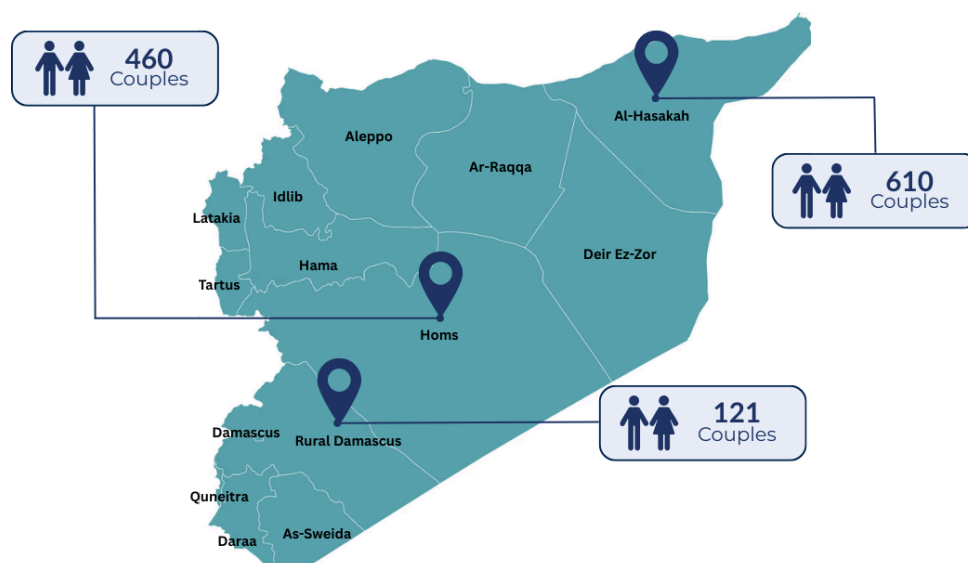
In Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) adapted and piloted the **Economic and Social Empowerment (EA\$E) couples' curriculum**. Through this programme, beneficiaries received **agro-processing vouchers** worth USD 400, or approximately twice the monthly income at the poverty line. Couples also participated in 15 EA\$E sessions aimed to strengthen women's business skills and knowledge, support joint household planning and budgeting, encourage spousal communication, and negotiate power for positive outcomes. The ten-session Discussion Group Series (DGS) curriculum covered topics related to household income, including budgeting, planning, and dealing with financial stress. Two DGS sessions focusing on early marriage including endogamy were added as adaptations to the Syrian context. Additional curricular adaptations were made to strengthen gender transformative elements, including enhanced attention to power, positive communication, and non-violent conflict resolution among couples. The Competency-based Economies through Formation of Enterprises component comprised five sessions and used a practical participatory learning methodology to develop and improve managerial and business skills in farm work. At the community level, FAO also implemented and evaluated Dimitra Clubs to reinforce these outcomes. Dimitra Clubs bring together community members to collectively identify and address local challenges using their own knowledge and resources. These clubs aim to challenge unequal gender norms and promote joint decision-making within households and communities.

Cash transfers and the Indashyikirwa curriculum

The Syria Resilience Initiative (SRI) implemented the **Indashyikirwa ('Agents of Change') couples' curriculum** pilot in Al-Hasakah. This curriculum was combined with **microenterprise grants** of USD 900 provided directly to married women. These grants were distributed in two rounds: USD 400 provided immediately after enrollment and USD 500 following the completion of the couple sessions. Couples also voluntarily participated in 21 sessions of an adapted Indashyikirwa programme. Adaptations were based on formative research, conducted by implementing partners and accounted for local cultural norms, conflict-related stressors, and community dynamics. For example, the adapted programme excluded a session on alcohol as a trigger or violence and

included two sessions on child rights and child marriage. Each session lasted between 1.5 to 3 hours. Wives and husbands attended sessions together, but if one partner could not attend, compensation sessions were offered. Discussions during these sessions covered power dynamics, gender roles, healthy communication, conflict management, economic decision-making, balancing household responsibilities, managing triggers of violence, and community responsibility. The curriculum aimed to strengthen practical negotiation skills, promote joint problem-solving, and foster mutual respect between spouses.

Figure 1. Map of BLRS VAWG Prevention Evaluations



Note: A map of Syria showcasing the target governorates and the number of couples included in the evaluations.

What are Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)?

The United Nations defines VAWG as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women”.⁷ IPV is a form of VAWG and refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes harm to a partner.

What is economic violence?

Economic violence refers to behaviours that control an individual’s ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, thereby threatening their financial autonomy, security, and wellbeing. Economic IPV is a specific form of **economic violence occurring within intimate relationships**. It restricts women’s financial autonomy and stability, increases their dependence on partners, and can make it harder for them to leave abusive relationships.⁸ It is commonly

categorised into three forms: **economic control**, **employment sabotage**, and **economic exploitation**. Culturally specific forms include refusing to contribute to basic household needs, controlling a spouse’s work or earnings, and restricting access to resources.

Economic violence can also be perpetrated by other household members, particularly in multi-generational families where financial decision-making is shared or controlled by senior relatives. Evidence from humanitarian settings, including Syria, highlights how household power hierarchies and gender norms can enable multiple actors within the family to influence or restrict women’s economic participation and control over resources.^{6,8}

Estimates of economic IPV prevalence among women remain limited and vary by subgroup and measurement approach.⁸ Estimates from a multi-country study in Asia and the Pacific indicate that one in five men reported perpetrating economic IPV during their lifetimes.⁹ Risk factors for economic abuse experiences include educational disparities between spouses, poverty, and traditional gender norms.⁸ Experiencing economic IPV is associated with increased poverty and food insecurity, reduced employment stability, and poorer health outcomes. Evidence on the drivers of economic IPV is limited, and there is even less evidence on effective prevention strategies, although the literature suggests that targeting couples may significantly increase the effectiveness of interventions.¹⁰

Baseline Prevalence of IPV in the Syria BLRS pilot

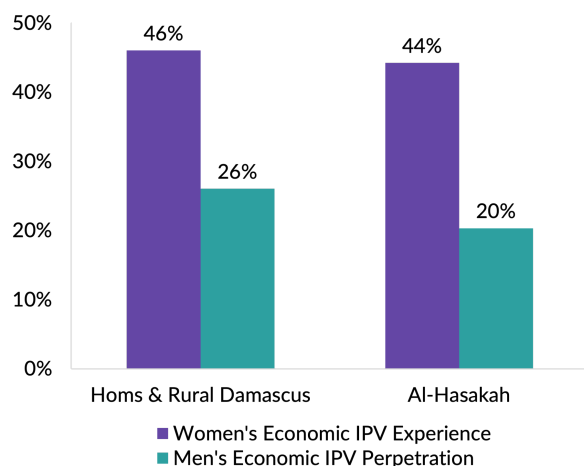


Figure 2. Baseline economic intimate partner violence in Syria

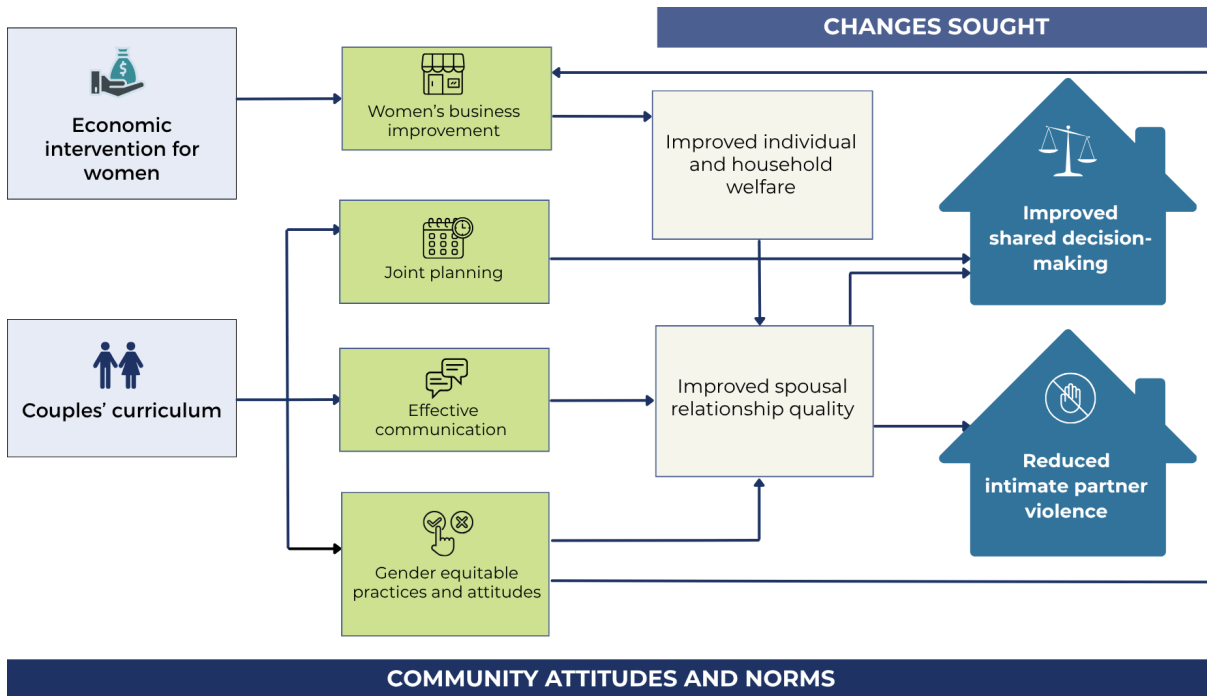
Women in Syria report experiencing economic IPV roughly twice as often as men report perpetrating it at baseline. About 45% of women reported experiencing economic IPV in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with about 23% of men reporting perpetration during the same period (Figure 2).

Emotional IPV was the most commonly reported form of IPV, with 55-64% of women reporting experiencing it in the past year. In Al-Hasakah, more than one-quarter of women reported experiencing physical IPV.

What did we assess?

To understand whether livelihoods support with couples' curricula can reduce violence and strengthen women's economic participation, ISDC rigorously evaluated the pilots between 2023 and 2025 using two randomised controlled trials.¹ The evaluations included 610 couples in Al-Hasakah and 581 couples in Homs and Rural Damascus. These evaluations **estimate the additional impact of the couples' curriculum compared with economic support alone**. Key outcomes included women's experiences and men's perpetration of IPV, focusing on economic IPV; joint decision-making, time spent on domestic work, sense of control; gender attitudes and perceptions of gender norms, including related to child marriage; individual wellbeing, spousal relationship quality; and household income. The theory of change in [Figure 3](#) presents how these interventions can improve shared decision-making and reduce IPV.

Figure 3. Simplified Theory of Change



Note: This figure illustrates the interventions used to drive change and the pathways through which they are expected to impact IPV and household welfare.

Ethical considerations

The programmes and evaluations were implemented following the 'do no harm' principle. Respondents were informed that the evaluations focused on household and family wellbeing,

¹ We used a pure randomization approach in the Al-Hasakah pilot and a restricted randomization approach in the Homs and Rural Damascus pilot. Further details on the methods are available in the study impact reports linked at the end of the References section.

rather than VAWG, to reduce the risk of stigma or backlash. Due to sensitivity concerns, the evaluations only measured men's perpetration of economic IPV and not other types of IPV. The evaluations received ethical approval, and extensive safeguarding measures were in place to protect privacy and confidentiality, manage distress, and ensure referrals to appropriate services.

Summary of findings

The outcomes for women and men are presented in [Table 1](#), with a summary of findings below.

Both pilots reduced some IPV forms experienced by women, with no changes observed for men.

- Women's reported 12-month experiences of economic and emotional IPV declined in the Homs and Rural Damascus pilot and experiences of severe physical IPV (hitting and having arm twisted) declined in the Al-Hasakah pilot.
- There were no changes to men's 12-month perpetration of economic IPV in the Homs and Rural Damascus pilot, but men were more likely to report spending money the household needed on themselves in the Al-Hasakah pilot.

Women's agency improved across both pilots, with no changes observed for men.

- Women's participation in household decisions (e.g., about who works outside the home, buying and selling items for the household) increased in both pilots. Women's agency in decisions about the marriage of their daughters also increased in both pilots.
- In the Homs and Rural Damascus pilot, women's daily time spent on domestic work decreased by about 37 minutes per day. Women's sense of control, which measures emotional regulation and beliefs in managing one's life events, also improved in Homs and Rural Damascus. No changes were observed in Al-Hasakah for these two outcomes.
- No corresponding changes were observed for men. Across both pilots, there were no shifts from sole to joint decision making and no change in men's time spent on domestic work. In the SRI pilot, men's time spent socializing increased by approximately 30 minutes per day, which may reflect the couple's curriculum aspect of the programme.

Measures of individual and spousal wellbeing improved in Homs and Rural Damascus, particularly among women, with no changes observed in Al-Hasakah.

- In the Homs and Rural Damascus pilot, women and men reported improved wellbeing, but there were no changes to mental health. Both women and men reported feeling more cared for by their spouses and women also reported feeling more respected by their spouses and more satisfaction in their marriages.

Gender attitudes shifted more in Al-Hasakah.

- Women in both pilots had more gender equitable attitudes and greater agreement with the unacceptability of child marriage at endline while corresponding changes for men were only observed in Al-Hasakah. Perceptions of broader gender norms did not change in either pilot.

No short-term economic gains were observed.

→ There were no impacts on broader household economic outcomes in the short term in either pilot.

Table 1: Summary of overall findings for women and men by pilot

Outcome measures	WOMEN			MEN		
	Expected direction	Homs and Rural Damascus	Al-Hasakah	Expected direction	Homs and Rural Damascus	Al-Hasakah
Intimate partner violence						
Experience of economic IPV	↓	●	●	-	●	●
Perpetration of economic IPV	-	●	●	↓	●	●
Experience of emotional IPV	↓	●	●	-	●	●
Experience of physical IPV	↓	●	●	-	●	●
Experience of severe physical IPV	↓	●	●	-	●	●
Agency and time use						
Participation in joint decision making	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Sole or joint decision-making on marriage of daughters	↑	●	●	-	●	●
Daily time spent on domestic work	↓	●	●	↑	●	●
Sense of control	↑	●	●	-	●	●
Wellbeing						
Individual wellbeing	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Mental health	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Feel cared for by spouse	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Feel respected by spouse	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Satisfaction with marriage	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Attitudes						
Gender equitable attitudes	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Justification of wife-beating	↓	●	●	↓	●	●
Perceptions of more equitable gender norms	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Unacceptability of child marriage	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Economic outcomes						
Household income	↑	●	●	↑	●	●
Improved household food security	↑	●	●	↑	●	●

Notes: The evaluations only assessed men's economic IPV perpetration and not the perpetration of other types of IPV for sensitivity concerns.

● Positive change (expected direction) ● Negative change (unexpected direction) ● No significant change ● Not measured

What did we learn?

We synthesise findings from the two evaluations in relation to the BLRS programme's core questions, focusing on how and why change occurred and where it remained limited.

Core Question 1

Are women and girls exercising greater agency over their bodies and lives?

The findings suggest meaningful but partial gains in women's agency. Across both pilots, women reported improvement in their joint decision-making, including on who works outside the home, buying and selling items for the family, and whether children in the house should marry. In Homs and Rural Damascus, these changes were accompanied by improvements in women's wellbeing, relationship quality, and sense of control over their lives.

These findings demonstrate that the interventions were effective in strengthening women's voice within households. However, the absence of corresponding changes reported by men points to an important gap: gains in women's agency may be occurring within existing power structures rather than reflecting a redistribution of authority. Differences in how women and men perceive and report decision-making may contribute to this divergence,^{11,12,13} but they may also signal that changes remain incremental and contested.

Changes in time use further illustrate these dynamics. While women's domestic workload decreased in Homs and Rural Damascus, there was no evidence that men increased their contributions. This finding raises questions about whether changes in women's domestic work may shift responsibilities to other women or girls within the household, rather than reflecting a transformation in the gendered division of labour.

Finally, participation patterns highlight equity concerns. Couples or members of couples with lower literacy or education levels, or disabilities, were less likely to enrol or complete the intervention. These groups are also at higher risk for IPV. Programmes' continued and targeted efforts will therefore be important to better reach and include marginalised groups and ensure interventions benefit those most in need.

Core Question 2

Is there greater support in targeted communities for women safely and sustainably accessing income generation?

The findings reveal distinct pathways of change across the two pilots, underscoring the importance of programme design.

Evidence of increased support for women's economic participation differs across the two pilots. In Homs and Rural Damascus, reductions in women's experiences of economic and emotional IPV suggest that the programme directly eased constraints on women's economic engagement. In contrast, in Al-Hasakah, where women's reported economic IPV experiences did not decline, changes were more evident in attitudes rather than behaviours. For example, in Al-Hasakah, both women and men's gender attitudes became more equitable regarding who works outside the home, but these changes in beliefs did not translate into noticeable increases in men's participation in domestic work. This divergence highlights that while some barriers to women's participation can shift in the short term, others, particularly those tied to control over resources, may be more resistant to change.

The changes among men were more limited and uneven. Overall, men did not report reductions in economic IPV perpetration, and in Al-Hasakah, men were more likely to report spending money needed by the household on themselves. While this finding may reflect increased awareness and more accurate reporting rather than an increase in harmful behaviours, it highlights the challenge of distinguishing real behavioural change from shifts in reporting and disclosure in the short term.

The differences between the two pilots provide important insights into how programme design shapes outcomes. The Al-Hasakah intervention placed greater emphasis on gender norms and attitudes. In contrast, the curriculum in Homs and Rural Damascus, which focused more on household economic practices and cooperation, had limited change on attitudes but achieved stronger impacts on shared decision-making, relationship quality, and economic IPV.

These findings suggest that different programme components may activate different pathways of change. Attitudinal shifts do not automatically translate into behavioural change, particularly in contexts where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched. Conversely, practical changes in household dynamics may reduce violence without fundamentally transforming underlying norms.

Across both pilots, women and men's perceptions of community norms did not change. This finding reinforces evidence that broader normative change typically requires longer timeframes and engagement beyond the household.

Together, these findings suggest the need for identifying what works to more effectively engage men, including whether approaches that promote context-appropriate positive masculinities hold promise. Longer evaluation timeframes would also help determine whether impacts strengthen, persist or fade over time.

Core Question 3

Are beneficiaries, especially women, earning more income to help meet their basic needs?

There is no evidence of additional short-term income gains attributable to the couples' curricula beyond economic support alone. This finding is not unexpected in fragile and volatile contexts such as Syria, where structural constraints, market instability, and limited opportunities can delay economic returns.

Despite this finding, several intermediate changes point toward conditions that may support future income gains. Improvements in women's participation in household decision-making and relationship quality, alongside reductions in economic women's IPV experiences and more favourable attitudes towards women's work, suggest that barriers to women's economic participation may be easing.

Together, as theorised, these changes should create the conditions for women's stronger economic participation over time compared to women who only have received economic support. However, the absence of immediate economic effects highlights a critical point: social change alone may not be sufficient to generate economic gains without sustained engagement, enabling environments, and time. This point reinforces the importance of long-term investment and realistic expectations. Short evaluation timeframes may underestimate programme impacts if they do not capture the lag between changes in household dynamics and observable economic outcomes.

What do we conclude?

In Syria's fragile recovery, rebuilding livelihoods is not only an economic challenge but also a social one. Addressing household dynamics and structures that sustain violence is crucial to promoting women's economic participation and improving household welfare. Evidence from the two BLRS VAWG prevention pilots provide important evidence on how combined economic and social interventions can contribute to reducing violence and strengthening women's agency in fragile settings. The findings demonstrate that pairing economic support with carefully adapted couples' curricula can initiate meaningful changes in women's lives, particularly in their greater agency, improved wellbeing and relationships, and reduced exposure to some forms of IPV. These are significant steps toward rebuilding stable livelihoods and promoting food security.

Despite signs of positive change, the findings are uneven and reveal important limitations. Impacts are concentrated primarily among women, with limited evidence of change in men's behaviours and no observable shifts in community-level norms. This suggests that while interventions can strengthen women's agency, they may not, on their own, transform the underlying power

structures that sustain inequality and violence. Without deeper and sustained engagement of men and communities, these gains may remain partial and could be difficult to sustain over time.

The absence of short-term income gains further highlights that economic recovery is not an automatic outcome of social change. While improvements in relationships and reductions in economic IPV are important preconditions, they must be accompanied by sustained economic opportunities and supportive environments to translate into tangible livelihood gains.

For policymakers and donors, the findings imply the need for sustained, long-term investment; clear and realistic expectations around what is achievable in programmatic timeframes; and approaches that deliberately engage men, communities, and marginalised groups. For implementers, findings highlight the importance of aligning programme design with specific pathways of change, rather than attempting to address all drivers simultaneously.

These pilots reveal that meaningful social change is possible even in fragile, crises-affected and unequal environments and can help create the conditions for economic gains to materialise. Improving women's economic and social participation, livelihoods, and household food security will depend not only on economic opportunity, but on sustained efforts to address violence and unequal power within households across Syria.

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