

Defending the achievements and rights of women in Syria

Annual Report 2024 of the Foundation of the Free Woman in Syria (Weqfa Jina Azad a Sûrî)

1. Situation on the ground

In 2024, the political situation in North and East Syria was characterized by massive and ongoing (air) attacks by Turkey. Not only military targets were hit, but also civilian targets such as the electricity and water supply, grain silos and health centers. Numerous employees of the local government were injured or killed. The population is suffering considerably from the consequences of these constant military attacks and the threat of war, with consequences for their mental health. They live with a feeling of constant insecurity. Even in everyday activities such as going to work or shopping, people have to fear for their lives.

December 2024 brought drastic political changes. The fall of the dictatorial Assad government was celebrated by many people. At the same time, there was growing concern about the new, Islamist-oriented HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) interim government. It is feared that women, ethnic and religious minorities will continue to suffer discrimination and violence under the rule of radical Islamist organizations.

At the same time, Turkish-backed jihadist mercenaries from the Syrian National Army (SNA) captured Minbic and Şehba. Massacres took place and 121,000 people were displaced again. Many had previously fled Afrin in 2018. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) accepted these refugees. WJAS was heavily involved in the initial care of the refugees. The WJAS office in Minbij was looted and subsequently destroyed. Three employees of the Arab women's organization Zenobia in Minbij were murdered.

2. The work in 2024

In general, the work of WJAS was very successful last year because

- The economic situation of many women has improved.
- Graduates of the hairdressing courses have opened hairdressing salons.
- Sewing course graduates have opened tailor shops.

- Graduates of the health-assistance courses have found employment in hospitals or doctors' surgeries.
- Exhibitions have been organized and goods produced in courses and workshops have been sold at low prices.
- Women in emergency situations have received mental and financial support
- WJAS helped four students to continue/finish their studies this year

- 152 employees worked at WJAS in 2024.

- The opening of an office in Aleppo planned for 2024 was realized and the opening of a practice for laser hair removal was prepared. The establishment of the office in Şehba could not be realized due to the political situation.

- At all **locations**, Qamişlo, Girkê Legê, Dêrik, Çil-Aghe, Hesekê, Dirbêbesyê, Raqqa, Tabqa, Kobanê, Minbij (until December), Serin, Aleppo (in the Sheik Masoud district) and in the Al Hol, Roj, Waşokanî, Serekaniye and Mahmudiye camps, in various combinations

- **Training** (hairdressing, tailoring, medical assistance, first aid)
- **Courses** – including language courses (Arabic, Kurdish, English – especially for young people), PC and literacy courses.
- **Seminars on health topics**, including recognizing and treating women's and children's diseases, contraceptive methods and pregnancy, child development and healthy nutrition.
- **Seminars on the effects of drugs** as part of prevention work and seminars about mental health.

As in previous years, the staff held lectures and courses on topics such as sexism, women and family, women and democracy, violence against women, child marriage, polygamy and anti-racism. Regular home visits continue to take place in order to get to know the women, understand their situation and to start a conversation.



3. basic healthcare

The Women's Foundation offers meanwhile basic healthcare in **five Ari clinics** for women and children for financially disadvantaged families who otherwise have little or no access to the healthcare system. The services include general medical, pediatric and gynecological examinations and treatment in an outpatient setting. The specialist staff, consisting of doctors and nurses, are employed on a part-time basis. A fee of between 5,000 and 10,000 SYL is charged for treatment, which corresponds to 50–75 euro cents. Financially disadvantaged people and the new refugees since December 2024 are treated free of charge. Prescribed medication is dispensed free of charge.

In addition to medical services, the Ari clinics also offer support and guidance.

The Dêrik **Mobile Clinic**, which was set up in 2020 in collaboration with the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain – Dêrik city partnership, was able to visit over 12 villages in the Dêrik region three times a week this year without interruption. The doctor mainly treated pregnant women, gynecological diseases, infections and children's illnesses. Prescribed medication was distributed free of charge. Seminars on the subject of health were also held.

All of the Women's Foundation's facilities near the border with Turkey offer **first aid courses** for the population in the villages close to the border. The training in medical first aid enables people to take action themselves in the event of attacks and accidents, thereby increasing the chances of survival for the injured. The courses are offered locally and last one week.

There are **centers for naturopathy** in Dirbêbesyê and in Hesekê and consultation hours in naturopathy were also offered in the Al-Hol camp. Treatment with herbs is based on the women's ancient knowledge, which is still available in the region. Herbs are also used to make medicines, oils, creams etc. for treatment. Common illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes and skin and gastrointestinal diseases, which are ubiquitous due to water shortages and poor water quality, are treated with naturopathy. There is a large demand. Naturopathy is not perceived as a minor alternative to conventional medicine, but as a mainstream branch of medicine. The knowledge has traditionally been passed down from mother to daughter in the family. Two women are currently being trained in Dirbêbesyê. There are no textbooks.



Examination at the Ari Clinic Qamişlo

4. special requirements for the work in individual towns and regions

The work in the camps has developed well. IS-affiliated women from Syria, Iraq and many other countries live in Camp Al Hol and Camp Roj with their children. Refugees from the occupied territories of Serekaniye and Afrin live in the Waşokani, Serekaniye and Mahmudiye camps.

After the enlargement of the office in **Al Hol camp**, the work could be expanded in 2024. Hairdressing, handicraft and first aid courses were held, and the theoretical courses could be expanded due to high demand.

WJAS took part in the self-administration project for the re-socialization of family members/wives of Syrian IS supporters. Some of the women who took part in the WJAS vocational and theoretical courses in Al Hol camp were able to leave the camp and find work as a result of the training they received.

Background: Many of the women come from very traditional families, were married very early, often at the age of 14 or 15, and had to subordinate themselves to their husbands (and their ideology), just as they did before in the family. Today they live in the camp as young women, often with several children, and have no prospects. They need a lot of support and patient discussion in order to start a new, free and more self-determined life for themselves and their children.

In Camp Roj, the staff of the Women's Foundation works extensively with children. Problems become apparent: for example, children didn't want to listen to music because they were told it was forbidden (according to IS ideology). Through persistent persuasion, things are slowly improving; they are gaining more confidence, opening themselves up to new experiences, and developing a love of music. For the women, courses are offered, among other things, on depression, which is a massive problem in the camps due to the lack of prospects and other reasons.

Large parts of Aleppo are still destroyed, both by war and the 2023 earthquake. Water and electricity supplies are unreliable. The two city districts of Sheik Masoud and Eşrefiyê are predominantly inhabited by Kurds and are politically and socially self-governing. People can move freely between the districts, but here, too, the embargo applies, and hardly any goods can be imported. The residents have learned to adapt to this difficult situation. Compared to other districts, women here enjoy a significantly better social and legal position, which is why there is an influx of women from other parts of the region to these two neighborhoods.

In 2024, a WJAS office was opened and a company car was purchased. Preparations were also made for the opening of a laser hair removal shop. Work has gotten off to a very good start. Computer, sewing, and hairdressing courses are in high demand, and the number of participants in first aid courses has recently increased. Since December, the office has been primarily focused on emergency aid for refugees. The situation is very delicate. The Sheik Masoud and Eşrefiyê neighborhoods are now directly surrounded by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This means that people



Entrance sign of the new office in Aleppo

must be vigilant day and night. Many refugees from Sheba have come to Aleppo. They need to be provided with food, clothing, and basically everything.

The work in **Dêrik** has been expanded, the office has been renovated and expanded, and the equipment (sewing machines, hairdressing accessories, etc.) has been upgraded.

Computer courses, vocational training in sewing and hairdressing, health education, seminars, and work with children were very successful in 2024.

The Lorenzo Orsetti Health Center in **Kobanê**, like the other Ari clinics, operates in consultation with the local health committee. The training courses, including computer, language, first aid, hairdressing and sewing courses, are offered continuously.

In 2024, 31 children lived in the **orphanage**. Several children were able to be placed with relatives. The foundation continues to maintain contact and check on their well-being. Berfin, who has a serious heart condition, is now with relatives with her siblings. The foundation continues to provide for her medical care. In December, the children were evacuated to Heskê due to the threatening situation (Kobanê is located directly on the border with Turkey) – they are still there (spring 2025).

Background: Widowed women are often forced to remarry to provide for themselves and their children. Traditionally, the children are given to the father's family. Women who do not want to separate from their children can only achieve this if their family of origin supports and provides for them. If the children are given to the father's family, this can potentially mean a difficult fate. But this structure, which has worked for centuries, is becoming increasingly tense. The economic situation is very tense; due to war, displacement and flight, often only part of the family remains or is widely scattered. The family cannot take in additional children if, for example, they live in a refugee camp or have fled to Europe.

The office in **Minbij** was renovated and re-equipped in 2024, and new staff were hired. Work was going very well until the SNA occupied the region in December 2024. The office was looted and subsequently destroyed.

At the WJAS office in **Qamişlo**, a total of 50 children receive English lessons three times a week. Music lessons and computer courses are held for the children during the summer holidays. Daily sports classes in the office's fitness

room are now also part of the regular program. The foundation's women participated in many activities for March 8th and the Newroz (Spring Festival). Three women work in the foundation's own cosmetic hair removal shop. The profits go towards the foundation's diverse work.

In **Raqqa** and **Tabqa**, among other things, the theoretical training courses have been expanded. Initial interest in purely manual work (sewing, hairdressing, and first aid courses, bead-work, embroidery, and crocheting courses) has developed into a greater interest in theory (women's rights, psychology, sociological topics, etc.). The mentality of the people in Raqqa is still influenced by the occupation by ISIS. Widows and divorced women are WJAS's most important target group here, because their situation is the most difficult. Activities are also offered for children. The surrounding villages also benefit from the trainings in Raqqa. The health training courses are held alternately with the hairdressing and sewing courses. The opening of the planned sewing workshop (a workplace for women) could not be realized in 2024 due to financial reasons.

Social engagement: At the foundation's centers, the employees discussed the social contract of North and East Syria together, particularly with a focus on the significance of the regulations for women.



Computer course in Kobanê

Last year the management positions in all work areas were distributed among three employees to ensure continuity of work. In this year joint training sessions were held on the topic of „Democratic Leadership.“ All work is to be coordinated jointly. This brings together „more color and more opinions.“ Openness is an important principle, as is a democratic way of working. Power, on the other hand, is a state mentality. The employees participate in joint training sessions every week, or at least every two weeks, to reflect on and strengthen themselves and their work.

With other women's organizations – Kongra Star, Sara, Zenobiya, the PYD, the Future Party, the Women Teachers' Association, and the Assyrian Women parties – flyers for March 8 were prepared and distributed. Seminars on the history of March 8 were held, primarily in the surrounding villages.

The Women's Foundation celebrated its 10th anniversary on September 1, 2024.

Emergency Aid

Starting in December, the Foundation participated in the initial care of refugees from Sheba and Minbij at all locations. It distributed mattresses, blankets, food, clothing, and medicine. Foundation staff visited the families, held conversations with the women, and supported them in coping with their new living situation.

5. Advocacy and Networking

WJAS staff were in 2024 represented in the following bodies:

- Women's Council in North and East Syria
- Syrian Women's Council
- Council of Civil Society Organizations (CSO)
- Coordination of Children in North and East Syria (Youth Welfare Office)
- Health Council in North and East Syria

6. Outlook for 2025

For 2025, WJAS plans to open offices in Damascus and other locations in Syria. Another focus is the development of economic projects, such as laser hair removal shops and the sewing workshop in Raqqa. The aim is to support more female students in continuing or completing their studies.

7. Work of the European Committee

Regular online meetings with representatives of the Women's Foundation continued in 2024. These meetings discussed the current situation and the various projects.

Public relations – in 2024, we had information booths at nationwide cultural festivals, as well as at the „War and Peace“ women's conference in Berlin, and locally in Berlin and Hamburg at alternative Christmas markets and events. In Hamburg, we were able to hold a fundraising event with Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê on the sidelines of an FC St. Pauli home game.

We developed a **new exhibition** on the women's revolution in North and East Syria, „Jin Jin Azadi,“ together with Kongra Star and WDR (Women Defend Rojava).

We launched a **fundraising appeal** for the new office of the Women's Foundation in Aleppo.

In the summer, the Frankfurt-Kobanê city partnership successfully carried out a campaign for medical treatment for a girl from the orphanage with severe heart disease.

We published the **Women's Foundation's statement** on the current situation at the end of 2024 here.

Two widely distributed appeals for donations were written for the **emergency aid campaign to provide for the 121,000 refugees** in December 2024. By March 2025, €100,000 had been raised.

The Kurdish artist Lukman Ahmad provided one of his paintings for the cover design of a **solidarity notebook** for the foundation, which we will distribute in exchange for a donation. Copies can be ordered from us.

Newspaper advertisements with appeals for donations were again placed around Christmas time.

Our website was further updated, and our social media presence was expanded.

This year, we continued our successful cooperation with Kurdistanhilfe e.V., the Berlin-Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg-Dèrik e.V. sister city partnership, and the Frankfurt-Kobanê sister city partnership.

In 2024, €80,000 was forwarded to the foundation (via Kurdistanhilfe e.V.) for the Women's Foundation's work areas (general, setting up the office in Aleppo and supporting the works in Raqqa) and €48,000 for emergency aid/initial care for the people who fled in December.

The Frankfurt Kobanê city partnership was able to donate €42,000 for the foundation's work in Kobanê. The Berlin-Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg-Dèrik city partnership provided for the running costs of the mobile clinic.

We would like to thank the Cologne-based „Kinderhilfe Mesopotamien e.V.“ for their fundraising for emergency aid and the many donors and supporters of our work not individually mentioned here.

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