



INSTITUT DE HAUTES
ÉTUDES INTERNATIONALES
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GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AND
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES



AMWAJ:

Women's Empowerment Through Water Management and Rehabilitation Projects

For our Advanced Research Project (ARP) in the Gender, Race, and Diversity track, we partnered with Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad from [Geo Expertise](#), a Geneva-based non-profit organization founded in 2010. We collaborated on “Amwaj”, *waves* in Arabic, a project that aims to empower female Syrian engineers and economists by providing them with technical and soft-skill training, such as communication, project proposal writing, and water rehabilitation program design and management, among others.

In September 2022, we embarked on a 10-day trip to conduct fieldwork in different cities in Hatay Province, Turkey. Our contribution to Amwaj consisted of conducting 27 semi-structured interviews with women and men working for US, Turkish, Syrian, and Kurdish (Iraq)-based humanitarian NGOs operating in northern, northeastern, and northwestern Syria. Several of these organizations were founded by Syrian professionals, coming from various backgrounds, who reoriented their careers, either by choice or necessity, to work in the humanitarian sector. These in-person and virtual interviews allowed us to explore the overall experience of women employed in the water/WASH sector including the barriers they face to finding a job as well as the greater sense of empowerment they achieve once employed. Our interviewees’ feedback and recommendations also allowed us to synthesize a list of best practices for the training.

Through our interviews, we were able to observe individual success stories of women reporting a higher level of empowerment according to Kabeer’s definition and framework. However, we found that although women experience empowerment at the individual level, they do not as a collective group. While women reported a higher level of empowerment through working in the water/WASH sector on all three dimensions of Kabeer’s framework (achievement, agency, and resources), there remain persisting barriers limiting this empowerment due to two main factors: 1) gendered cultural norms and 2) issues of safety related to Syria’s current geopolitical context which can prevent women from working in the field (e.g., in camps).

Finally, through our connection with Dr. Haj Asaad, we were invited to stay at Walla, *to make a promise* in Arabic, Supportive House in Reyhanli, Turkey. Over the past decade, the shelter has been supporting the reintegration of displaced refugees—women, often widows, and their children—from the Syrian conflict and helping them to establish themselves in their new community in Turkey. Walla was our home base for the duration of our trip.

Overall, the project not only allowed us to contribute to research aimed at empowering female Syrian professionals, but also to gain new friendships and develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Syrian culture.