

Syria: IWPR Women's Centre Re-opens

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Staff and users defy bomb damage to continue their activities.

An IWPR women's centre in beleaguered Eastern Ghouta has reopened just two weeks after it was badly damaged in an airstrike.

The Syrian regime is blocking almost all food and medicine for the more than 400,000 residents of Eastern Ghouta, already been living under almost daily artillery fire and air raids for four years.

The centre in Hazza, run by Women Now, had defied this tightening siege to continue providing a safe space for local women to study and network. Its internet café also provided women with vital access to the outside world.

But after a bombing raid damaged the building and shattered all its windows, Women Now were forced to suspend their activities in Hazza.

Tuhama Darwish, the centre's director, told IWPR that conditions in Eastern Ghouta were increasingly grim.

"The situation is tragic," she said. "There is very little medical help or medicine, we have even less food, water and electricity, and pay high prices for everything. It is not safe to leave the house, even if you are critically ill."

Despite this, both staff and users remain committed to the centre. As soon as staff made the building safe to ensure it could reopen, women defied ongoing shelling to visit the centre and ask about future activities.

Around 20 women visit the centre each day, Darwish said.

"We have ten computers with internet connection which are all free of charge for women. We provide them with computer-related training workshops, as well as certificates."

The 27 year-old mother-of-one stressed the vital importance of this resource in a conservative society where women's empowerment is limited.

"The goal remains to transform women into active partners in all aspects of life," she said, adding,

"Some of these women have found a way to earn money, others learned more about their rights and about leadership," she said. "They feel more confident in themselves and it is not an easy thing in this conservative area."

Women Now runs three centres in Eastern Ghouta and two in northern Syria, as well as another two in Lebanon.

Spokeswoman Lama Rajeh said that more than 11,000 women had used the centres last year.

As well as internet access and training, the centres also offer courses in leadership skills, communications, advocacy and even handicrafts. There is a crèche where women can leave their small children while they use the facilities or take courses.

"Some women had problems coming to our centres at first, but now they are able to support their families, thanks to our training workshops or the small grants programme," Rajeh said.

This programme has also funded a crucial resource for the local community; a basement playground where children can enjoy themselves despite the ongoing air raids.

"This is an idea that everyone has welcomed and encouraged, and it's providing a safe space for children to continue some of the play activities that war has deprived them of," she said.

Darwish explained that conditions in Hazza had long been harsh, even before the current siege.

"Since the regime cut off electricity and water five years ago, we began relying on solar energy and generators," Darwish said, adding that water was also scarce and very expensive.

Amnesty International has described the siege in Eastern Ghouta as a crime against humanity, with cluster bombs dropped on civilian-dense, residential areas. There is only one hospital in the whole of Eastern

Ghouta, which lacks the capacity to meet the basic needs of the population even before this onslaught. Even the Syria Civil Defence, known as the White Helmets, have been unable to carry out their emergency work.

This article was originally published on IWPR's Syria platform: [SyriaStories.net](#).

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