

Yemen: advocacy on violence against women

Oxfam GB

Context

Oxfam and partner experience in Yemen has shown that women's limited access to information and education, cultural restrictions on women's movement and financial dependence of many poorer women on their male relatives, render them particularly vulnerable to violence. If women find themselves on the wrong side of the law and particularly if they are considered to be guilty of 'moral crimes', they are likely to face exclusion from their families, poor treatment and even abuse at the hands of male staff in police stations, prisons and detention centres.

Roles

The Yemen Women's National Committee (WNC) promotes dialogue with decision-makers to ensure justice for women.

The Legal Protection and Advocacy Project (LPAP) established in June 2004 aims to ensure that the legal system protects the rights of vulnerable women in Yemen. Part of the programme aims at raising women's awareness of their legal rights, through the provision of targeted legal advice.

Oxfam is also doing advocacy work, which aims to lead to the provision of free legal services for poor women by the state, and to fair and respectful treatment of women in all areas of the judicial system. This project is implemented in partnership with the Yemeni Women's Union.

The process and the results

Oxfam funds the *Yemeni Women's Union (YWU)* to provide free legal support to poor women in prisons, courts and police stations through 36 volunteer lawyers, in five districts. As a result, 450 female prisoners were released in 2004 and 2005.

Until 2006, women prisoners who completed their sentence were forbidden to leave prison unless a male guardian collected them, a law which was overturned by the Ministry of the Interior following an advocacy campaign by Oxfam and WNC.

Oxfam also supports the YWU to work with male police and judicial authorities to improve their treatment of women in custody. As a result of the challenges in bringing about these changes, the Aden branch of YWU called for the first ever women-staffed detention centre in Yemen, which finally opened following agreement with Aden's Security Director in 2005. The centre has improved facilities and the women say that they feel much less threatened because it is easier to communicate with their female supervisors.

This case study was written as a contribution to the development of *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008. It is published in order to share widely the results of commissioned research and programme experience. The views it expresses are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam International or its affiliate organisations.

Quotes

- 'It took patience and persistence to persuade Aden's Security Director that a female-staffed detention centre was urgently needed. We pursued this matter relentlessly – until the Security Director gave instructions for it to be set up.' YWU's Valentina Abdul Karim
- 'The current staff know why the centre was needed, so they have more sympathy for the detainees.'
- 'At least I sleep peacefully here,' said one female detainee
- Hyfa Al-Shahary is a lawyer working for the Human Rights Information and Training Centre. 'When I visited a prison and saw the conditions the women were kept in, I knew I had to get involved. I felt that women could be more at ease with a woman advocate. My job is to get the women's cases through the court quickly rather than letting them hang around for ages. It's not easy.'

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