



Salama Abdu Thabet and daughter Eaman in Al Hodeidah Governorate, Al-Jarrahi, Yemen © Caroline Gluck /Oxfam

# OUR COUNTRY, OUR PEACE

Why women must be included in Yemen's peace process

The Yemen conflict has had a catastrophic effect on its people, with specific impacts on already-vulnerable women and girls. But political talks about Yemen's future have almost exclusively been conducted by male politicians and combatants. This contrasts with the 2011 uprising, when women helped set Yemen on a path towards political reform. However, the 2011 peace initiative which followed the uprising lacked inclusivity and proved to be unsustainable. The forthcoming talks about Yemen's future must not repeat these flaws. Ensuring women have a meaningful voice in the peace process increases the likelihood that its outcomes benefit the majority of Yemenis and enjoy their support.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Yemen's uprising of 2011 promised to be a turning point for its women, with new opportunities to participate in politics, influence laws and promote social and economic progress. Historically marginalized from political processes, Yemeni women took to the streets and stood side-by-side with men to demand change. Women not only launched campaigns to oppose the 'call to violence' by the government, but ultimately helped to secure the resignation of the President, a unifying demand from local activists.

The 2011 revolution brought mixed results for women. On the positive side, it opened space for some women to participate in politics – a necessary step to enable women to help build a more progressive and stable country. Thanks to their leadership in the revolutionary movement, women earned a seat at the table at the 2013–2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was charged with meeting the demands of the popular uprising.

Political parties were required to appoint women to 30 percent of their seats. Including additional seats for women not affiliated with political parties, women took 152 out of the 565 seats at the NDC. Women then led three of the nine working groups in the NDC that focused on different issues, and had a significant presence on the technical committees and the constitution-drafting committee that followed.

'Women during the uprising entered politics in great numbers,' one Yemeni human rights activist told Oxfam in late November. 'For some it was the continuation of years of struggle, and for others, it was their first direct act of political participation. It was the start of a new Yemen, one where gender equality seemed attainable'.

Such participation enabled Yemeni women to take important early steps towards expanding women's rights and start addressing crucial inequalities. They called for equal citizenship, advocated for women's access to and control of national wealth, and pushed for a ban on sex-based discrimination. They advocated for female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual harassment and trafficking to be criminalized. Most impressively, they successfully pushed the NDC to recommend setting the minimum age for marriage at 18.

These actions were important in setting a positive course not just for women but for Yemeni society as a whole. But tackling entrenched gender and economic inequalities requires years of sustained efforts to change and enforce laws as well as shift social attitudes before real impacts are widely felt.

Indeed, while some women were achieving progress in politics, many others faced daily struggles to survive. Four out of five women that participated in focus groups organized by Oxfam in 2012 said their lives – in terms of obtaining food, income and security, for example – had become worse since the handover of power in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, the process of political transition, as well as the NDC itself, contained serious flaws – including a lack of inclusivity that limited the role and contributions of women and other elements of Yemeni society (see section 3 below).

But those initial efforts and achievements – interrupted by the current brutal conflict – demonstrate how the participation of women in political discussions and decision making can help put Yemen on a course to become a more just, prosperous and stable society. The conflict has, however, undermined and reversed even those fragile gains.

The latest peace talks, due to start this month, must avoid the mistakes of the past. They should provide women with an effective role in shaping a peace that endures and benefits all Yemenis.

## 2 CONFLICT AND CRISIS

Before the current conflict, millions of women and girls in Yemen already faced a daily struggle to survive as well as deeply entrenched social and gender inequalities. Yemen was ranked last out of 142 countries in the 2014 Gender Gap Index (as it has been since 2009), with 50 percent of women literate compared to 83 percent of men, and earning approximately 75 percent less than men on average.<sup>2</sup> Data from before the current turmoil show that 52 percent of Yemeni girls have been married off before the age of 18 – often to much older men – and 14 percent before the age of 15.<sup>3</sup>

No country can expect to enjoy lasting peace and stability when half its population face such discrimination and their contribution to social and economic development is so constrained.

An economy crippled by political instability and violence had left more than one in three Yemenis poor and hungry in 2014. In such dire circumstances, women and girls faced a host of challenges, including having to skip meals, physical threats to their safety and mobility, and forced early marriage of girls as a means for desperate families to cope with destitution.

But from late 2014, that humanitarian crisis became worse as armed clashes broke out across the country and the Ansar Allah faction (also known as the Houthis) took control of the capital Sana'a. The armed intervention in support of the Yemeni government by a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015 has seen a further deterioration. Yemen's humanitarian crisis has spiralled into one of the world's worst emergencies.

Ground fighting, shelling and indiscriminate attacks by Ansar Allah and allied groups have led to displacement and many civilian deaths and injuries. However, the coalition's campaign of airstrikes is primarily responsible for the displacement of more than 2.5 million people, as well as two-thirds of the nearly 5,800 people killed, including women and children.<sup>4</sup>

The coalition's de facto blockade on Yemen has brought the economy to its knees. Yemen imports the vast majority of its fuel and food. In September, the country received just one percent of its fuel needs.<sup>5</sup> Although food imports increased modestly in October, only 12 percent of monthly fuel needs to power homes, hospitals and water pumping and treatment facilities came into the country.

Conditions in Taiz, Yemen's third largest city, are some of the worst anywhere inside Yemen. Hundreds of thousands of civilian men, women and children are suffering from the worst impacts of the war. Many people are trapped inside the city without food, water and medicines. Civilian lives and their means of survival are in the line of fire, with civilian neighbourhoods and medical facilities around the city continually hit by shelling and bombing. The UN's Emergency Response Coordinator Stephen O'Brien described Taiz as a 'city under virtual siege', with armed groups blocking food and medical supplies from entering, and humanitarian agencies denied access to the besieged population.<sup>6</sup>

The end result is nothing short of a catastrophe. More than 21 million Yemenis, representing 82 percent of the population, need some form of assistance, with over 7.6 million people severely food insecure. Already vulnerable, women and girls have been hit hard. Women appear to be suffering from elevated levels of domestic violence. They have been reducing their own meals to ensure that their children have enough to eat. Approximately 522,000 pregnant women lack access to healthcare.<sup>7</sup>

Precise information is scarce but Yemeni families are reported to be increasingly using early marriage as a coping mechanism and a means to access dowry cash.<sup>8</sup> Although hugely under-reported, conflict-related sexual violence, including sexual violence against men and boys, is believed to be high in Yemen.<sup>9</sup>

Such appalling circumstances not only compound humanitarian concerns; they inevitably contribute to anger, resentment and despair, which damage prospects for peace.

All warring parties should at all times respect international humanitarian law and ensure civilians have safe, unhindered access to humanitarian assistance regardless of their background or perceived allegiances. Moreover, an immediate ceasefire is needed to end the bloodshed and create conditions conducive for peace and recovery efforts.

Members of the international community supplying weapons to the warring parties should halt transfers of arms and ammunition owing to the significant risk of their use in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict.

Ultimately, there can be no military solution for rebuilding a peaceful and stable Yemen. Hence, the international community and the conflict parties must prioritize establishing a peace process that maximizes its chances of long term success and stability.

Yemeni women's organizations can play a vital role in helping civilians survive and recover from the current conflict, ensuring women's specific needs are understood and met, and rebuilding more stable communities within a more responsive and accountable state. However, these

*'The conflict has strangled our freedom to talk and move. There are more cases of sexual and domestic violence. I dare not go out after sunset into the unlit streets'.*

*Dalya Qassem,  
head of Houdeidah Girls  
Foundation, November 2015*

organizations have historically struggled for resources to conduct such work consistently and at scale and will need sustained support to do so.

## 3 THE PATH TO PEACE

Resolving violent conflicts is an enormously challenging task. Not only must political differences be resolved but the outcomes must address the causes of conflict and enjoy popular support and legitimacy in order for any settlement to be sustained. Such objectives are extremely difficult to achieve without an inclusive approach that enables different sections of society to contribute their perspectives and expertise, recognize their role in the process, and enjoy a stake in its lasting success.

This was one of the flaws of the political transition process of 2011, which fell under the mediation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It began promisingly but ultimately lacked inclusivity. The process only addressed the formal political parties, prioritized regional and international political interests, and disregarded many of those who had swelled the ranks of the uprising, including women leaders.

The GCC-mediated process resulted in a political deal signed in Saudi Arabia on 23 November 2011, with witnesses from the Gulf monarchies but not Yemen's revolutionary youth and female campaigners – some of whom protested in the Yemeni capital Sanaa that day.<sup>10</sup> Although the NDC involved some young or female intellectuals and technocrats, most delegates were older male politicians.

**The current Yemen peace process must follow a different path** – a path already highlighted by Yemeni civil society, promised in international agreements and commitments, and backed by growing evidence that peace processes are more successful when women are included.<sup>11</sup>

At a conference in Cyprus hosted by UN Women on 11 October 2015, a group of 45 Yemeni women with diverse political views called for an immediate ceasefire, an end to the conflict and an urgent response to Yemen's humanitarian crisis. Additionally, they called for women to be included in the formal peace process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.

A landmark agreement on women, peace and security, UNSCR 1325 affirms women's right to participate in efforts to respond to and recover from conflicts, and promotes their safety and equality.<sup>12</sup> Seven further Security Council resolutions have helped develop these normative and policy frameworks.

The latest, UNSCR 2242, was adopted in October 2015 and co-sponsored by a record 71 Member States.

*'Without a place at the table for women to fight for their rights, the battle for equality will fail. None of the rival groups will remember we exist or work for our interests unless we are there to push them and remind them that we are here and must be heard'.*

Writer and independent activist  
Atiaf Alwazir, November 2015

Reinforcing international pledges and commitments enshrined in UNSCR 1325 and other resolutions, UNSCR 2242:

*'...reiterates the call for Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, and resolution of conflict, encourages those supporting peace processes to facilitate women's meaningful inclusion in negotiating parties' delegations to peace talks...*

*'calls upon donor countries to provide financial and technical assistance to women involved in peace processes, including training in mediation, advocacy, and technical areas of negotiation, as well as providing support and training to mediators and technical teams on the impact of women's participation and strategies for women's effective inclusion,*

*'further encourages the meaningful participation of civil society organisations at international and regional peace and security meetings'.*

At the High Level Review of UNSCR 1325 in October 2015, a record 113 UN member states spoke at a Security Council open debate in support of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Barely two months later, the international community's promises and commitments are being put to the test at the peace talks due to begin later in December. It falls to Yemeni parties, the United Nations and the international community to ensure that the voice that women have gained through their peacetime activism is not lost in wartime negotiations.

Recent efforts by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen to strengthen women's participation in the process are very welcome and should be strongly supported by all relevant diplomatic and conflict parties.

The international community and the warring parties should also ensure that the opportunity provided by the peace process to reset Yemen's development path is not missed. An inclusive process that meaningfully involves women and addresses their needs is more likely to address social and economic inequalities generally – thereby promoting long-term peace and stability.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Yemeni parties and the Saudi-led coalition should:**

- Agree to an immediate ceasefire and prioritize inclusive political solutions to end the bloodshed;
- Ensure Yemeni civilians have safe and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance wherever they are;
- Lift the de facto blockade on Yemen, and allow humanitarian and commercial supplies into conflict areas such as Taiz;
- Protect women, men, boys and girls from all forms of conflict-related abuse and violence.

## **The Yemen conflict parties should:**

- Ensure that women constitute at least 30 percent of their delegates and can meaningfully participate in talks;
- Comply with the demands of UN Security Council Resolutions on supporting women's role in peace and security including ending impunity for acts of sexual and gender based violence.

## **The UN Special Envoy for Yemen should:**

- In consultation with Yemeni women leaders, continue to ensure women have a voice in negotiations and their needs are appropriately addressed. This could be achieved through various means, including ensuring all delegations include a minimum 30 percent of women in their ranks, by inviting an all-women cross-party or non-partisan Yemeni delegation, providing gender advisors and technical experts, and coordinating closely with UN Women to support the Women's PACT for Peace initiative.

## **Donor governments should:**

- Ensure that the specific needs of women, girls, men and boys are analysed and met by the humanitarian response, including by involving women and girls in the design, implementation, monitoring and decision making related to humanitarian response and recovery programmes;
- Provide multi-year core funding and sizeable grants for Yemeni women's organizations. Funding to these organizations should be direct whenever possible and prioritize strengthening their institutional capacity;
- Halt the transfer of arms and ammunitions to all conflict parties owing to the significant risk of their use in committing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Still Waiting For Change: Making the political transition work for women in Yemen, September 2012. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1M38Kd5>
- <sup>2</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2014, World Economic Forum. Available at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/>
- <sup>3</sup> Yemen Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006, UNICEF, PAFAM, and Ministry of Public Health & Population.
- <sup>4</sup> UN OCHA Humanitarian Bulletin, Issue 5, 13 November 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> UN OCHA Shipping Snapshot. 11 November 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> See Statement by UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien, 24 November 2015. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-stephen>
- <sup>7</sup> 2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview. Yemen Country Team.
- <sup>8</sup> Humanitarian Crisis In Yemen Gender Alert July 2015, Inter-Agency Standing Committee
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> President Saleh signs Gulf-brokered power deal ending 33 years in office, report by Al-Arabiya News, 23 November 2011. Available at: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/23/178702.html>
- <sup>11</sup> For example, see Thania Paffenholz. Beyond the Normative: Can Women's Inclusion Really Make for Better Peace Processes? Graduate Institute, Geneva, April 2015. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1lusZeP>
- <sup>12</sup> For more information about the progress and challenges in implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda worldwide, see Oxfam's briefing paper Women, Peace and Security: Keeping the Promise, September 2015. Available at: <http://oxf.am/ZWhA>



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