



Now *is* the Time: Research on Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in the Middle East and North Africa

Country synthesis note: Yemen

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Background

This country synthesis note accompanies the research report 'Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in MENA' that was commissioned by Oxfam Great Britain to International Alert to examine the impact of fragility and conflict on gender justice and women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Even prior to its ongoing armed conflict, which broke out in 2015, Yemen held the unfortunate distinction of being ranked last out of 142 countries on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index.¹ Women and girls suffered from high rates of child marriage, poor political representation, and extreme poverty and unemployment. Despite this, women and youth led the uprisings that ousted the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and prominent women leaders such as Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman were instrumental in mobilising protesters and enjoyed a high level of international recognition.² Yemeni women played various roles in the uprising, from shielding protesters from security forces, taking part in frontline demonstrations and assuming behind-the-scenes roles. Many women activists reported facing slander and harassment during protests and some women complained that political parties instrumentalised the presence of women for their own political gain.³ Women's participation was further advanced during the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) held during the transitional period in 2013–2014 when, under the auspices of United Nations (UN) entities and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), the UN Special Adviser on Yemen Jamal Benomar negotiated a series of conditions that improved the representation of women in the NDC. Women achieved a representation of around 28% (just short of the 30% quota), and women leaders were instrumental in setting the agenda of the NDC and in chairing some sessions, despite having to lobby for their right to participate against stubborn

¹ World Economic Forum, The global gender gap report 2014, Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014>

² For a more in-depth exploration of the roles that Yemeni women played at all levels during the 2011 revolution, see W. Shakir, M. Marzouk and S. Haddad, Strong voices: Yemeni women's political participation from protest to transition, London: Saferworld, 2012, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/666-strong-voices>

³ Ibid.

opposition. During the discussions, gender issues such as the age of marriage, paid maternity leave and gender-based violence were raised.⁴

Yemen is now engulfed in one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world, which is characterised by widespread food insecurity and malnutrition. More than 10,000 people have been killed and three million are internally displaced.⁵ Saudi Arabia is leading a large military coalition against the Houthis epitomised by heavy airstrikes that have precipitated grave suffering of civilians. The economy has entirely collapsed and the country is on the brink of famine.⁶ A gender analysis of the conflict conducted by Oxfam, CARE International, and GenCap in late 2016 found that the conflict has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities and violence against women and girls, but also that women have taken on more active roles in humanitarian relief at the community level.⁷

Methods and challenges

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with representatives from six women's rights organisations (WROs); nine key informants (including activists, former WRO/INGO employees and academics); and three individuals involved in UN bodies and in INGOs. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with women and girls aged 17–43, including with participants in Sana'a and 12 participants in Aden.

Oxfam's name was not used during the FGDs with women and girls, however, researchers disclosed Oxfam's role during interviews with the WROs and key informants, with the permission of Oxfam's Yemen office. Infrastructural and security issues hindered data collection and participants had to be reached remotely. Due to the centralisation of WROs in the north

⁴ For further background on the inclusion of women in the NDC and the topics of discussion, see R. Coomaraswamy, *Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, UN Women, 2015, p.53

⁵ K. Shaheen, *Yemen death toll has reached 10,000, UN says*, The Guardian, 16 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/16/yemen-war-death-toll-has-reached-10000-un-says>

⁶ *Yemen and Somalia 'months away' from famine*, Al Jazeera, 22 March 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/yemen-somalia-months-famine-170322125343027.html>

⁷ W. Gressmann, *From the ground up: Gender and conflict analysis in Yemen*, Oxford: Oxfam, CARE International and GenCap, 2016, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/from-the-ground-up-gender-and-conflict-analysis-in-yemen-620112>

of the country, it can be assumed that the position of WROs in the south is not as well represented.

Findings

1. Who is filling the gaps left by the state in Yemen? What positions, discourses and actions do these actors and the state adopt towards gender justice and women's rights? In what ways have the positions, discourses and actions of these actors changed over time?

Yemen has descended into a highly complicated multilateral armed conflict that has split the country between the Houthi rebels (who have formed a tenuous alliance with Saleh in a self-proclaimed joint government), who hold the capital Sana'a and territory in the north, and the internationally recognised government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi based in Aden in the south. There are pockets of the country in which al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have governance projects or a high level of influence. Tribes also serve as de facto governance actors in certain areas.

Women's participation and women's rights do not count as high priorities for governance actors on any side of the conflict and women have been excluded from high-level peace talks. Of the three tracks of peacebuilding, women have prominent roles only in Track III, the level of community initiatives, but are largely excluded at the Track I and II levels.⁸ The highly conservative Houthi/Saleh coalition has not appointed women to any substantive positions nor engaged them in peace negotiations. Meanwhile, the Hadi government has not done much better in engaging women meaningfully other than for external appearances: for example, one WRO respondent was frustrated that the Hadi government brought women in a delegation to the peace talks in Kuwait in 2016, but pointed out that

⁸ Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental diplomacy, while Track II diplomacy refers to non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals sometimes called 'non-state actors'. See D. Snodderly, *Peace terms: Glossary of terms for conflict management and peacebuilding*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp.50–51, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/peaceterms.pdf>. Track III diplomacy refers to the participation of grass roots or community based organizations participation in formal diplomatic processes.

civil society organisations (CSOs) were not widely consulted or included.⁹ Governance actor priorities instead revolve around vying for control of Yemen. Unsurprisingly Salafi jihadist groups that have governance projects or ambitions have a punishing stance towards women's participation. The position of tribes towards women's rights is more nuanced, as some tribes accord women informal roles in decision-making and mediation, even while maintaining conservative gender norms.

2. What are the consequences of the above on the ability of CSOs and WROs to drive a gender justice agenda? That is, how is the women's rights and gender justice agenda being prioritised by state actors and/or other governance actors, compared to [national] security agendas and other competing agendas (e.g. humanitarian response imperatives, donor pledges and priorities), and the need to contend with ongoing economic crises?

Yemeni non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (including gender-focused NGOs and WROs) are highly influenced by donor priorities to the point **that donors, and to a lesser extent INGOs, have a disproportionate level of influence on national NGO and CSO priorities and programming.** Most national NGOs have few or no reserve funds and are unable to function without the support of international donors and INGOs to provide sub-grants, making it difficult to carry out their long-term visions and strategic work in gender justice and equality. Physical access to donors and INGOs is important for accessing funds, which privileges WROs and CSOs based in Sana'a over those based in more far-flung areas, including the south. Several participants (including those involved in WROs, as well as activists) mentioned that donors imposed their own priorities and agendas on WROs even prior to the start of the current conflict, rather than listening to the

⁹ The UN Special Envoy's press release announcing the arrival of the women at the talks can be found at UN Department of Public Information, Yemen Peace Talks in Kuwait: Press statement by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, 5 May, 5 May 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-peace-talks-kuwait-press-statement-un-special-envoy-yemen-ismail-ould-cheikh>; A press statement of the women's delegation and their list of recommendations can be found at Rasha Jarhum, Yemeni Women Delegation Messages to Support Peace Talks, Rasha Jarhum's Blog, 20 May 2016, <https://jarhum.wordpress.com/2016/05/20/yemeni-women-delegation-messages-to-support-peace-talks>

needs and priorities of women at the grassroots level. One WRO director interviewed noted that requests for funds for gender equality programming alongside humanitarian funds are not really being heard by donors.

To this end, there is a broad consensus among participants that the humanitarian imperative now dominates the work of CSOs in Yemen, and that **long-term, strategic work in gender justice and equality has been compromised**. This loss of the gender agenda is heavily linked to donor dependency: as donor funds are dispatched towards humanitarian programmes, national WROs must follow in that direction to keep afloat. While no one doubts the importance and need for humanitarian aid in Yemen, WROs affirm that working on the gender justice and equality agenda in parallel to humanitarian programming is critical to the resolution of the conflict and the long-term stability of Yemen.

3. What are the strategies developed by national and regional WROs and CSOs to counter this reduction in space and push the women's rights agenda forward? What are they striving for and what are the commonalities? What gendered role and influence, if any, do women's Islamic or other faith-based civil society actors exert, and do such groups complement or compete with non-religious WROs and CSOs in advocating for women's rights and participation? Have any CSOs or WROs operating in regions that are controlled by non-state actors found it easier to push forward their agenda in comparison to those operating exclusively in government-controlled areas?

A limited number of WROs continue to work in Yemen. WROs are primarily focused on humanitarian relief, with some small-scale projects in women's political participation, and women, peace, and security. All WROs interviewed emphasised the importance of reviving and increasing funding for strategic work in gender justice and equality alongside humanitarian work. WROs based outside of Sana'a in the north likely have an easier time obtaining funds for operation and for permits from the de facto authorities, while organisations in the south have been hindered by the poor security situation and donor withdrawal. Operating is challenging in all areas of the

country, however, and WROs feel the burden of the collapsed economy and face logistical difficulties such as lack of liquidity and the need to collect large amounts of data for international funders.

Yemen has become highly polarised on political lines and this at times translates to women activists as well. **Political divisions are impacting the women's movement**, and have hampered the formation of a unified voice that is capable of exerting enough pressure for better representation and participation of women. Political divisions have played out in the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security, an initiative begun in late 2015 by Yemeni women leaders with the support of UN Women, which initially struggled to arrive at concrete recommendations or actions to forward women's participation as members have often been consumed by political arguments. The Pact has made some progress in the past year, however, and shows promise.¹⁰

4. What role do international development actors (donors, INGOs) have to play in countering the negative effects of conflict and fragility on the realisation of women and girls' rights? What can be done at the national, regional and international level? How does the role and scope that international development actors could play differ, depending on the area in which they are trying to operate (state/ non-state governed areas)? How can INGOs support WROs/CSOs and gender-sensitive programming, while mitigating for political, security and reputational risks to national partners and to beneficiaries?

A consensus among participants affirms that the **UN and to a lesser extent INGOs demonstrate a high commitment to gender equality in documents and strategies, but are not following through** in their actions. For example, INGOs and the UN tend to engage with the **same limited pool of elite women activists** – in the words of several participants “the

¹⁰ For example, a group of women leaders in the Pact were on the delegation brought to the Kuwait peace talks by UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. Rasha Jarhum, Yemen's only hope for lasting peace," Huffington Post, 18 July 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aspn-new-voices-fellowship/yemens-only-hope-for-last_b_11053758.html

same old faces” – that they have been working with for years. Young women activists and women at middle and lower levels of the community are excluded despite harbouring great potential. Yet even these elites are being left out as women’s participation at high levels has become more symbolic than substantive. Many of these women are active in less visible ways at the community level but they lack training, confidence and platforms to air their concerns. A more constructive approach would be to engage these younger activists. Participants noted that INGOs and UN bodies have a low appetite for risk and this obstructs any real progress to be made in a recalcitrant conflict. Women’s participation in Yemen has never been achieved without a significant amount of pressure from Yemeni women and from the international community – and the situation is no different now.

Finally, many women now find themselves supporting their families financially because men are absent or are unable to fulfil traditional economic roles. While this has led to an increased acceptance of women working in some communities, the additional burden stresses traditional gender roles and adds to women’s already-high level of unpaid responsibilities in the home. Women who work tend to do so in the informal sector, often by running their own small businesses, and are not protected by labour laws. The cut-off of state salaries for government employees has been especially devastating to women civil employees. It is imperative to empower women, by, for example, increasing the amount of short-term economic projects and providing long-term support to WROs to carry out the long-term, strategic work necessary to bring about positive changes in gender equality and gender relations. Women and girls also suffer disproportionately from the breakdown in social services, including the destruction of schools and universities, and a breakdown in the health system. Thus, as participants agreed, considerably more donor and INGO support is needed for economic stability in the country.

