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📍 Yemen

Rana, a survivor of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Yemen

By Oxfam's Protection Team

Rana¹ initially approached the community centre, run by Oxfam's local partner, because she had been suffering at the hands of her husband, who used to beat and mistreat her. She had also been a victim of sexual abuse by her husband and his acquaintances.

Rana told the community centre's social worker that her husband was dealing drugs and involved in other suspicious activities. Her family were aware of this, but Rana's mother and eldest brother were on good terms with her husband, who provided them with money in exchange for their silence. So, Rana's choice was not easy: either she would be forced to live with her husband, who had abused her, or go back to her family who she knew would quickly return her to him anyway.

Rana's desperation had already led her to try to end her own life once. It was only thanks to a friend that she survived this: 'she found me laying and bleeding in the living room. She called a neighbor for help, then I found myself in the hospital'.

Soon after, Rana's friend approached one of the members of the community-based protection network (CBPN) to understand how the community centre could provide support. After Rana had left the hospital, her friend supported her to contact the centre for help. Rana was referred to a social worker, who worked with her to understand her case in full and inform her of her rights, as well as providing her with psychosocial support. Rana was also referred to a lawyer for legal consultation and to understand her available legal options. She had decided to leave her husband, telling us: 'this is the best decision I could have made; I could no longer live with such an abusive person.'

However, this decision meant that Rana had nowhere to stay: she could not go to her mother or eldest brother for support, and she certainly could not go back to her husband's house. After discussing her situation with the social worker, Rana decided that her best option was to stay with her sister while she arranged the divorce.

The legal system in Yemen has been affected by the ongoing conflict. Access to justice is not always possible or applicable to everyone, especially women. Rana was lucky, as she was able to access a social worker and a legal representative – but such services are not available to everyone.

Rana has now divorced and moved to another city to start her life afresh. The community centre has continued to support her, including through referring her to a specialized gender-based violence (GBV) agency so that she could obtain specialist medical assistance and psychological support to help her recover from the abuse that she had suffered. Rana has expressed gratitude to the community centre and Oxfam for supporting her.

¹ Not her real name.

Note

The community centre faced challenges providing the legal assistance aspects of their interventions, which involve legal counselling, mediation and legal representation for GBV survivors. The local authorities have suspended these activities several times during the project period, concerned that Oxfam and our partner had a hidden agenda to change the traditional sociocultural values of the community. The authorities have accused Oxfam and its partner of breaking down family relations by supporting married women in obtaining divorces, and taking a stand against dominant social practices. Furthermore, one of the local authority representatives had stated that 'it is not acceptable to support GBV survivors and women with legal assistance; counselling and mediation or hiring lawyers. Because this is not the role of the community centre, it is the role and responsibility of the state'.

The CBPN members and community centre staff have played an important role in approaching and changing the local authorities' point of view regarding the role of the community centre in supporting women and facilitating their access to legal services, as well as influencing the district authorities to facilitate the work of the community centre.