

# **A Year in Patriarchy:** Key Setbacks in Yemeni Women's Rights in 2024

---



# A Year in Patriarchy: Key Setbacks in Yemeni Women's Rights in 2024

---

By: Bilqees Al-Lahbi, Rim Mugahed and Lara Uhlenhaut

February 4, 2025

**Cover photo:** Yemeni women © Sana'a Center 2025.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

---

Away from the Red Sea crisis that dominated the headlines of 2024, the space for female political and social actors in Yemen has continued to shrink, largely unchecked. Today, the distinction between the repression in areas controlled by the Houthis and those under the internationally recognized government is becoming increasingly blurred. In Houthi-controlled areas, a campaign of terrifying arrests of civil society actors that started last June and continues to date has seen various female activists and peace workers targeted, some of whom are languishing in prisons incommunicado under dire conditions. In areas under government control, polarization and conflict among the various political factions are primarily to blame for undermining women's rights. Political partisanship and a policy of divide and rule have meant that women have sometimes been instrumentalized in such oppression, targeting other women and the very organizations that serve them. Meanwhile, the harassment and intimidation of women has also spilled over from the physical realm to the online world, where the surge in online harassment, extortion, and blackmail, primarily targeting women, is receiving more attention. Below are some key developments in the field of women's rights observed in 2024.<sup>[1]</sup>

## A Brutal Campaign of Intimidation and Arrests, Extending to Women

Panic spread among Yemenis last June after a frenzied campaign by Houthi security forces targeted employees of international and aid organizations, accusing them of collaborating with foreigners. According to [Amnesty International](#), in early July, the number of detainees was estimated to be 27, among whom were four women. The actual number of those forcibly detained is likely to be much higher. Families may refuse to report the arrests for fear of Houthi retaliation and the *shame* that could arise if details of the arrests are made public. Some activists speaking to the Sana'a Center claim that a much larger number of women were arrested, some of whom were released due to the political and social influence of their families or because their families paid large amounts of money in exchange for their release.

Some were not as lucky. The case of Sarah al-Faeq, arrested [in June](#) alongside other targeted employees working for international organizations, underscores the tragedy of these detentions. Sarah, a civil society activist and Executive Director of the Civil Coalition for Peace, remains in custody, cut off from communication with her family. In [January, her mother passed away](#), unaware of what fate awaited her daughter. Multiple requests were made to the Houthi-run Security and Intelligence Service for Sarah— [still being held without legal process](#) — to see her mother, but to no avail. Forced disappearances and the wave of arrests in Houthi-controlled areas extend beyond civil society actors accused of colluding with foreigners. They are also carried out to silence any voice of dissent. In a society that prides itself on the “protection” of women and that has put in place various measures to “safeguard”

<sup>[1]</sup> The Sana'a Center spoke with several female activists for this article. They have been granted anonymity to preserve their safety.

them, women are not spared the inhumane treatment reserved for anyone daring to question the status quo.

On September 10, media figure Sahar Abdullah al-Khawlani was arrested by the Houthis. Popular among her followers, Sahar criticized the Houthis' repressive policies and was vocal on social media about the dire economic situation in Houthi-controlled territories, the withholding of salaries, and the widespread corruption. She publicly and repeatedly requested payment for her salary as an official radio and television employee. Moammar al-Iryani, Yemen's Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism, **accused** the Houthis of torturing her to the point of losing consciousness before she was transferred to the hospital in critical condition. In January of this year, **several members of her family** were also allegedly detained, including her mother, sister, and young children, in a move that local rights organizations deem as collective punishment by the Houthi authorities.

In the aftermath of the arrests and the ensuing intimidation campaign carried out across Sana'a and other areas under Houthi control, many activists chose to flee. For women, the fear of sexual assault is both threatening and justified. In the lead-up to the September 26 revolution anniversary, Houthi authorities took steps to **suppress celebrations** commemorating the overthrow of the imamate. Speaking confidentially to the Sana'a Center, a female activist said the authorities approached her in August, warning her against participating in celebrations as she had done the year before. She went into hiding after being intimidated and receiving threats, including ones of sexual assault, which prompted her to leave Sana'a in secret.

## Divide and Conquer: A Bad Year for Women Organizations

As repression continues to reign supreme in areas controlled by the Houthi group, fragmentation and polarization continue to undermine government-controlled areas. The divisions crippling Yemen's internationally recognized government have permeated the realm of women's rights, where partisan agendas take precedence over collective efforts to fight inequality. Last May, in two separate incidents on the **13th** and **26th**, the Southern Transitional Council (STC)-backed Southern Women's Union, together with a group of armed men, **forcefully took over** the Aden headquarters of the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU). The **YWU**, one of Yemen's largest and oldest civil society organizations dedicated to advancing women's rights, operates in various governorates and has a membership of 1,400,000 nationwide. It is also home to Aden's only shelter for female victims of gender-based violence. The shelter was subjected to a siege that lasted several days, during which STC-armed forces attempted to impose their dominance on the YWU. "Instead of guaranteeing the safety of women fleeing violence and strengthening the work of civil society organizations providing protective services, STC authorities have exposed them to further violence," said **Amnesty International**. Headquartered in Sana'a, the YWU has been affected by the same divisions impacting various Yemeni entities in recent years, including the Central Bank and the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate. Women affiliated with the STC contend that the word «Yemen» in the Yemeni Women's Union contradicts their demands for southern independence.

Rivalry among women's organizations, compounded by the lack of institutional and financial support, undermines the collective strength of Yemeni women, hindering efforts for meaningful change. This unfortunate reality is becoming increasingly more evident. On December 1, 2024, Aden hosted the **7th Women's Summit**, organized by the Wogood Foundation for Human Security and attended by one of the authors of this paper. In the opening speech, Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak affirmed the government's commitment to empowering women, noting that women's political and economic empowerment is a "top priority" for the government and a "fundamental pillar for societal advancement." The reality backstage, however, was far from smooth. In the lead-up to the event, a two-day workshop was held with over 80 participants from various governorates across Yemen to discuss economic negotiations, road openings, the forcibly disappeared, and civil space. While the first day proceeded as planned, the second day was brought to an unexpected halt by an intervention from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. Approximately 50 women signed a petition addressed to the Governor of Aden, expressing concern that these meetings could threaten the southern cause.

## **Virtual Abuse: A Rise in Blackmail, Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**

As the physical space for women shrinks and further implodes, the virtual world offers little respite. While the Internet has opened unprecedented opportunities for Yemeni women to express themselves and engage in political activism, it has also led to various forms of abuse. Digital harassment, cybercrime, and blackmail are **on the rise in Yemen**, which has no current laws safeguarding users from abuse in the digital world. Women who express opinions **that deviate from social norms can face vehement attacks**, and online violence is often worse for women with a public presence. Last year, the Sana'a Center published a **report** highlighting the challenges women face heading women's associations in Hadramawt. On top of the bureaucratic hurdles imposed on some of these female leaders, including the withdrawal of institutional support and the demand for them to vacate their premises, many have also reported experiencing online harassment. Abusive comments, personal attacks, and trolling led to many reconsidering their public and professional lives. Some revealed distressing experiences with cyber sexual harassment, including unsolicited sexual advances, inappropriate content, and privacy violations, such as sharing their pictures and data without their consent. In a traditional and conservative setting such as Yemen, such actions can have devastating consequences on women's lives and the reputation of their families. Harassment in this form is often the most effective tactic to intimidate women in the spotlight, leading them to step down or scale back their efforts. A **recent report** shedding light on electronic crimes in Yemen indicated that the number of victims reporting cybercrime, mostly extortion-related, reached 2,400 cases in the first half of 2024. Women represented 98 percent of that statistic.

## The Cost of Inequality

That 2024 was another challenging year for women in Yemen is an understatement. **Movement restrictions** on women continue unabated and are pervasive across the country. Authorities in both government-controlled and Houthi-controlled areas continue to hinder women from traveling between governorates and, in some cases, from traveling abroad without a male guardian's permission or being accompanied by an immediate male relative. Displacement remains widespread, exacerbated by climate change and extreme weather events that continue to devastate Yemen, as demonstrated in last **summer's deadly floods**. Of the 4.5 million displaced in the country, **80 percent** are women and children. They endure harsh living conditions in areas lacking basic necessities, where the humanitarian sector often overlooks their **specific needs** and fails to integrate gender concerns into humanitarian programs adequately. 5.5 million women needed reproductive health services last year, and 2.7 million pregnant or breastfeeding women required treatment for acute malnutrition. Only one out of five healthcare facilities in Yemen offers maternity assistance and childcare.

The rise in **food insecurity**, primarily caused by deteriorating economic conditions and pauses and cuts in food assistance, is severely affecting women and girls, who are overwhelmingly on the sharp end of exploitation and sexual abuse. The case of **Ghalib al-Qadi**, exposed last summer, shocked Yemenis and illustrates the tragedy of power imbalances in desperate times. Ghaleb acted as a liaison between Yemeni expatriates residing in the US and the Gulf and poor families in Yemen. He devised a fraudulent donation scheme to target vulnerable families on the breadline and entered a string of marriages to sexually exploit and abuse several women, including minors, in exchange for providing them with aid. Activists claim that this is not an isolated incident and that cases of food aid being used to exploit women in vulnerable circumstances are not uncommon. For women who belong to ostracized and marginalized communities such as the *muhammasheen*, the vulnerability is even worse. A recent Sana'a Center **report** notes how cases of *muhammasat* subjected to harassment or sexual abuse have risen since the war began as perpetrators act with increasing impunity.

## Beyond “Resilience”

Year after year, the war in Yemen continues to create thousands of orphaned girls, widows, and displaced women. Many shoulder the responsibility of providing for their communities under dire economic conditions, even harder security conditions, movement restrictions, and gender-based violence. The prevailing atmosphere in Yemen is filled with both desperation and anger, which weighs heaviest on those deprived of power who try to adapt and accept what is imposed by those who hold it. In conditions where there is an increased lack of electricity, lack of water, lack of roads, no jobs, no security in the streets, no purchasing power, limited education for kids, violence surrounding them from all angles, and a local and regional reality that only exasperates, talk of women's resilience adds insult to injury. It is true that

Yemeni women miraculously succeed in creating a parallel reality and manage to create **new ways of living** to save themselves, their families, and their communities. But as we leave last year behind, the protection of Yemeni women's rights remains as critical as ever. Those with the leverage to put women's rights and living conditions back on the table must ensure that the international focus on Yemen's role in regional conflict does not overshadow critical local concerns. Without global oversight, there is a significant risk that further encroachments on Yemeni women's rights go largely unchecked.

**Bilqees Al-Lahbi** is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies focusing on Yemen's political and social developments. Al-Lahabi has more than 15 years of experience in research, civil society, development and project management.

She served as deputy chair, and acting chair, of the Southern Issue Working Group at Yemen's National Dialogue Conference from 2013 to 2014. Al-Lahbi has co-founded and led multiple political and civil society initiatives, including a coalition against the Sa'ada wars in 2007.

She holds a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry from Sana'a University School of Science.

**Rim Mugahed** currently leads the "Supporting Broader Inclusion and Participation in the Yemeni Peace Process" program. She is also a sociologist and her work on Yemen focuses on women in prisons, community perceptions of women policing and female voices.

**Lara Uhlenhaut** is an editor with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. She has lived and worked extensively in the Arab region including as Gender and Development Consultant with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Yemen and as Editor with the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Beirut. Lara holds an MA in Anthropology of Development from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London and a BA in English Literature from the University of Kent.

*This analysis is part of a series of articles examining the role of women working in various fields in Yemen, including education, diplomacy, journalism, and civil society. It was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.*



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)