



# Absent from the Negotiation Table and Shunned from Public Life: Yemeni Women at a Crossroads

Rim Mugahed

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Cover photo: Yemeni women walking in Aden on February 21, 2022 // Sana'a Center  
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# Introduction

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Across the globe, women share the burden of being largely excluded from decision-making bodies, but few are feeling it as acutely as Yemeni women.<sup>[i]</sup> An almost decade-long war, coupled with a feminist, civil, and democratic experience that is yet unripe, and a strong patriarchal social system, have made it exceptionally hard for women to engage in public life. These factors, among others, have led Yemen to fall at the bottom of the list of countries with the worst gender gap indexes in the world,<sup>[ii]</sup> as reflected in the complete absence of women from parliament, government, and the ongoing peace negotiations.

Nationwide, women are being denied the right to determine their own destiny, while their perspectives and priorities for peace remain unheard. On top of this, they are bearing the brunt of the fallout from a war they did not choose, and that is being largely decided by a handful of men holding political and military power. Despite the fact that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations and public life is enshrined by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, for which Yemen is a ratifier, this has meant little to Yemeni women. The commitments to uphold the tenets of this resolution have been bargained away, to the advantage of warring parties, further reinforcing a culture that systematically excludes women and that represses their demands for justice and inclusion.

For those daring to inhabit the public space, the cost has become too high. The expectations placed on them by society are immense.<sup>[iii]</sup> External influences have also played a role in the marginalization of Yemeni women, including the interference of regional powers in Yemen and the mirroring of their oppressive policies; the weak role of the international community, led by the UN, in supporting women; and that of Yemeni female leaders themselves, who have struggled, in the face of unrealistic expectations, to adequately advocate for their peers. Based on extensive discussions and interviews held with some of Yemen's most prominent activists, researchers, mediators, and lawyers advocating for the rights of women, this analysis will attempt to shed light on some of the obstacles and challenges faced by Yemeni women at the negotiation table and in public life.<sup>[iv]</sup>

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<sup>[i]</sup> "Yemen: One of the Worst Places to Be a Woman," Amnesty International, December 16, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/12/yemen-one-of-the-worst-places-in-the-world-to-be-a-woman/>

<sup>[ii]</sup> In 2021, Yemen ranked 155 of 156 in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. "Global Gender Gap Report 2021," World Economic Forum, March 2021, [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>[iii]</sup> Women's workloads have increased considerably since the war as they take on the weight of caregiving responsibilities, often under very harsh conditions, while also trying to earn an income following the country's economic collapse. Maryam Alkubati, Huda Jafar, and Esham Al-Eryani, "Grassroots Voices: Women and Everyday Peacebuilding in Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 28, 2023, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/Grassroots\\_Voices-Women\\_and\\_Everyday\\_Peacebuilding\\_in\\_Yemen\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/Grassroots_Voices-Women_and_Everyday_Peacebuilding_in_Yemen_en.pdf)

<sup>[iv]</sup> Author conducted interviews with ten prominent Yemeni figures who support and advocate women's rights in Yemen. These were held between October and November 2022, and in August 2023, and involved a combination of face-to-face, Zoom, and WhatsApp interviews.

# Unripe Yet Formative Feminist Experiences

The feminist movement in Yemen is relatively new, dating back to the state's modern era. The first feminist movements were seen in the south of Yemen during British rule and were part of a national struggle against the occupation. A policy of *tahrir al-mar'a* (women's emancipation) in the 1960s came as a result of the policies of the National Liberation Front, which took over when the British left Aden and called for the eradication of patriarchal frameworks, for women to be educated, and to join the labor market.<sup>[6]</sup> The north of Yemen, meanwhile, had a more conservative social, economic, and political system. After unification, more specifically between 2005 and 2010, political developments in Yemen led to women starting to play a more active role in the public sphere.

In this period, a limited but important space was opened up for activists and journalists. Coinciding with the Sa'ada wars,<sup>[6]</sup> and with the rise of the Southern Movement, it became normal to see protests in the streets of Sana'a and Aden. President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime clamped down on activists but retained a small opening for civil movements. Women were at the forefront of this, defending freedom of speech and fighting for basic human rights, the most prominent battle being Yemeni women's call to set a minimum age for marriage.<sup>[7]</sup>

Marking a new relationship with street protests and the public sphere, in 2011, with the advent of the Arab Spring, women broke the submissive stereotype of meek and voiceless beings belonging to the home by joining protests in Yemen's squares. The likes of Tawakol Karman, Arwa Othman, and Bilqees al-Lahbi, along with other female activists who continue to shape the future of women today, rallied crowds and led protests alongside men, breaking the monopoly of those in power.

The peak of this feminist wave came with women's participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013-14. The experience cemented the relationship between women and the public sphere, which would not have been possible without the efforts made by women in the decade leading up to the NDC.

<sup>[6]</sup> Susanne Dahlgren, "Revisiting the Issue of Women's Rights in Southern Yemen: Statutory Law, Sharia and Customs," *International Journal of Archaeology and Social Sciences in the Arabian Peninsula*, 2013, <https://journals.openedition.org/cy/2039>

<sup>[6]</sup> Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge – Yemen: On the Brink, A Carnegie Paper Series," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2010, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war\\_in\\_saada.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf)

<sup>[7]</sup> Led by the Yemeni Network for Combating Violence Against Women, in 2005, a campaign was launched to raise awareness of the physical, mental, and social impact of child marriage in Yemen. This led to relentless civil actions taken by women between 2005 and 2011. Advocacy campaigns against child marriage garnered the support of Yemeni media and members of parliament. Recurrent demonstrations were held in the capital Sana'a and petitions were organized with signatures collected from every corner of Yemen, an unstoppable tide organized by the likes of the National Woman Committee, the Yemeni Women's Union, the Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights, and other civil society organizations, most of which were women-led. Rim Mugahed, "Facing Up to Legal Slavery: A Timeline of Yemeni Women's Fight Against Child Marriage," *As-Safir*, August 16, 2022, <https://assafirarabi.com/en/46924/2022/08/16/facing-up-to-legal-slavery-a-timeline-of-yemeni-womens-fight-against-child-marriage/>

Each political group represented at the NDC was mandated to be at least 30 percent female. Women also made up 25 percent of the political body leading the NDC, and 28 percent of the overall participants. They also led three of the nine NDC working groups, constituted 9 percent of the judges on the Order and Standards Committee, and made up 25 percent of the Consensus Committee.<sup>[8]</sup> These efforts laid a solid foundation for women's participation in decision-making processes, by incorporating their demands and perspectives.<sup>[9]</sup>

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<sup>[8]</sup> "Bringing Peace to Yemen by Having Women at the Table: What the U.S. Must Do and Why It Matters," U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, August 21, 2017, <https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ICAN-US-CSWG-Policy-Brief-August-28-2017.pdf>

<sup>[9]</sup> While difficult to talk about a 'feminist' movement in Yemen, given the deeply rooted patriarchal, traditional, and religious nature of Yemeni society, women's movements during this critical period can be viewed as 'unorganized feminist movements.'

# Exclusion from Negotiations and from Public Life

Ten years after the NDC, there has been an alarming rollback in the hard-earned rights gained by Yemeni women, alongside their marked absence from the peace negotiations and public life in general. Since the outbreak of the conflict, four official peace negotiations have been held, in addition to an agreement between two factions within the anti-Houthi camp. The participation of women in all the negotiations to date has ranged from 0 to 12 percent,<sup>[i4]</sup> and has progressively gotten worse over the years, with times where the main parties blatantly refused to allow women's participation in peace talks.<sup>[i4]</sup> In the latest round of official negotiations, which led to a ceasefire agreement in April 2022, none of the delegations from either the internationally recognized government or the Houthis involved women,<sup>[i2]</sup> except for two who were invited by the Office of the UN Special Envoy, but these were advisors, not negotiators.<sup>[i3]</sup>

The absence of women from the negotiation table is symptomatic of a wider problem. Across the country, women are facing systematic defamation campaigns, and violence against them is on the rise.<sup>[i4]</sup> In the north, Houthi authorities have adopted an unprecedented oppressive approach directed at all women,<sup>[i5]</sup> but particularly those working in civil society, a trend that is not limited to the north alone. Nationwide, civil society work has been demonized, and branded a 'foreign invasion' by both the warring parties and the religious authorities. For women prominent in the public sphere, this has translated into prolific defamation campaigns, slander, threats, extortion (primarily blackmail using photographs of targeted women), and accusations of debauchery and immorality (especially those who do not adhere to conservative attire expected to be worn by Yemeni women). These attacks not only affect women, but also their entire families, and can have devastating consequences. In October 2022, local female activist Sara Alwan, attempted to take her own life in Taiz city after being blackmailed by her male neighbor.<sup>[i6]</sup> Other prominent

<sup>[i4]</sup> Maryam Alkubati, "Women's Voices in the Peace Process: Priorities, Recommendations and Mechanisms for Effective Inclusion," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 25, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/19400>

<sup>[i4]</sup> Rana Ghanem, Assistant Secretary-General for the Nasserite Party, interview by the author, November 2022.

<sup>[i2]</sup> Throughout the negotiations to date, no women were ever represented in Houthi delegations. The Stockholm negotiations in December 2018 saw no female representatives from the Houthi side, despite the large size of their 21-member delegations. The Houthis argued that because they couldn't guarantee the safety of their women, they would not risk bringing them. The government, on the other hand, included one woman in its main delegation. The Technical Advisory Women's Committee established by the UN envoy's office in mid-2018 consisted of six women. Griffith's team of experts also formed a part of the negotiations and was made up of six members, including two women.

<sup>[i3]</sup> Moeen al-Obaidi, lawyer and tribal mediator, interview by the author via WhatsApp, November 2022.

<sup>[i4]</sup> A recent study suggests that gender-based violence has increased during the conflict, noting that women and girls have been affected by rape, kidnapping, sexual harassment, and domestic violence perpetrated by armed groups and community members as well as husbands, fathers, and brothers. Dr. Fawziah Al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett, Shams Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War," December 15, 2019, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/A\\_Gendered\\_Crisis\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf)

<sup>[i5]</sup> "Women's Rights are Non-Negotiable," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 18, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/september-2022/18922>

<sup>[i6]</sup> Sara Alwan's decision to end her life came after losing a long battle with blackmail. Neither law enforcement nor the authorities, family, or community, were able to provide her the protection she needed. Sympathetic reactions flooded in on social media, but so did ridicule, disbelief, and attempts to shift the blame from her blackmailer to her. Taiz Police announces the arrest of the main suspect in the case of blackmailing activist Sarah Alwan," NewsYemen, November 3, 2022, <https://newsyemen.net/new/89066>

female leaders have reported intimidation tactics that include accusations of espionage and working for foreign entities; belittlement and marginalization; mocking of their appearance and age; as well as allegations of corrupting society by supporting distorted foreign models that do not belong to a conservative society like Yemen.<sup>[47]</sup>

Yazeed al-Jeddawi, Research Coordinator at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and an activist, describes cooperation between political actors and religious influencers as a "marriage of convenience," where both parties work for the benefit of the other.<sup>[48]</sup> The aim of this alliance, he notes, is to target civil and political freedoms that could threaten the broad powers they enjoy. Since women's movements in the public sphere are part of this threat, they become the primary target, which proves easy in a country like Yemen, where paternal traditions reign supreme, the state is completely absent, and there are no protective mechanisms for women to speak of.

Social media, meanwhile, has facilitated such targeted violence and has become a source of terror for many. With heightened social tensions in the country, the internet has increasingly become a place for venting anger, and a channel through which the public can pour scorn on vulnerable groups, women in particular. Sadly, the attacks are not just limited to cyberbullies and blackmailers — the struggle often begins at home. While families may be open to women working and participating in the public sphere, the cost of public shame is one that Yemeni families attempt to avoid at all costs, even if it means paying with the blood and lives of women they love. This has led to two outcomes: first, very few women are able to work in public affairs, leading to a noticeable scarcity; and second, the public sphere remains limited to men, and a select group of women who have put up with unimaginable hardship and persist despite the intimidation they face.

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<sup>[47]</sup> In one of the most notorious defamation cases, Dr. Olfat al-Dubai, who was part of the Constitutional Drafting Committee at the NDC, and is currently a member of the Reconciliation and Consultation Committee, was subjected to such defamation. Al-Dubai spearheaded the "My Passport Without Guardianship" campaign, which aimed to help women gain access to travel documents without obtaining the approval of a male guardian, a campaign that led to backlash. Al-Dubai suffered extensive defamation, slander, insults, accusations of apostasy and debauchery, and was accused of 'planning to destroy society.' The campaign was not only driven by the general public but was led by intellectuals, academics, journalists, government officials, and diplomats. Despite her being a member of the state apparatus, she did not have any means of protection. As recounted by Dr. Al-Dubai at the "Women's Voices in Yemen's Peace Process," workshop held in Amman, Jordan, in September 2022 organized by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and attended by the author.

<sup>[48]</sup> Yazeed al-Jeddawi, Research Coordinator at the Sana'a Center and activist, interview by the author via Zoom, November 2022.

# Policies that Mirror Those of Regional Players

The suppression of women's right to engage in public life has precedent in the region. While Saudi Arabia's alleged liberalization of policies toward women has won international acclaim, and the United Arab Emirates is hailed for making progress toward narrowing the gender gap,<sup>[19]</sup> both countries continue to adopt severe discriminatory and oppressive measures against women and girls.<sup>[20]</sup> <sup>[21]</sup> On the other side of the Arabian Gulf, Iranian women have risen against the oppression of Iran's regime demanding greater individual freedoms, which has been met with a brutal government crackdown.<sup>[22]</sup> Worryingly for Yemeni women, these are the neighboring countries with the biggest stake in Yemen,<sup>[23]</sup> and whose regressive policies on women are being replicated and imposed on Yemeni women through their local allies. The recent Houthi requirement for women to be accompanied by a mahram when they travel was a policy long enforced by Saudi Arabia, and only repealed in 2019.<sup>[24]</sup> Equally, Houthi control over details such as women's clothing, the type of music played at weddings, and other minutiae are again policies that reproduce those previously followed in Saudi Arabia, and still followed in Iran.

The likelihood that these regimes will put pressure on their allies in Yemen to adopt measures such as nominating women to the cabinet, including them at the negotiation table, or protecting women in the public sphere, is very slim. Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, a Senior Researcher at the Sana'a Center, notes that regional influences prevent women from having a seat at the negotiation table "not only because they are women, but because women represent a deeper democratic dimension to any political negotiation process, which regional leaders do not want and will not encourage."<sup>[25]</sup>

<sup>[19]</sup> "UAE ranks 1st in Arab World in Gender Gap Report 2022," Gulf News, July 14, 2022, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/uae-ranks-1st-in-arab-world-in-gender-gap-report-2022-1.89254715>

<sup>[20]</sup> Megan K.Stack, "The West Is Kidding Itself About Women's Freedom in Saudi Arabia," New York Times, August 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-women-rights.html>

<sup>[21]</sup> "UAE: Greater Progress Needed on Women's Rights Significant Discrimination Against Women, Girls in Law and Practice," Human Rights Watch, March 4, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/uae-greater-progress-needed-womens-rights>

<sup>[22]</sup> Deepa Parent and Ghoncheh Habibiadzad, "Iranian forces shooting at faces and genitals of female protesters, medics say," The Guardian, December 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/dec/08/iranian-forces-shooting-at-faces-and-genitals-of-female-protesters-medics-say>

<sup>[23]</sup> Saudi Arabia exerts direct influence on Yemen's internationally recognized government, the UAE exercises influence through its staunch ally, the Southern Transitional Council, religious groups in Taiz receive direct support from either Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE, and the Houthis receive support from Iran.

<sup>[24]</sup> Emma Graham Harrison, "Saudi Arabia allows women to travel without male guardian's approval," The Guardian, August 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/01/saudi-women-can-now-travel-without-a-male-guardian-reports-say>

<sup>[25]</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, Senior Researcher at the Sana'a Center and activist, interview by the author via Zoom, November 2022.



# The UN: Ticking Boxes

Outside the local and regional dynamics at play, the United Nations' approach, specifically that of the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Yemen (OSESGY), the main office (alongside UN Women) responsible for implementing the Women Peace and Security Agenda<sup>[6]</sup> in Yemen, has arguably contributed to the marginalization of women in Yemen, rather than preventing it. Activists interviewed agreed on three key UN shortcomings that have damaged public perceptions of Yemeni women's involvement in public affairs.

First, UN efforts to involve women largely through forming 'women's groups' have ultimately isolated women, confining them to a performative style of participation that is largely symbolic. Majed al-Kholidy, Chairman of the Youth Without Borders Organization for Development<sup>[7]</sup> noted that the "women advisory groups at the UN Special Envoy's office were only tasked with advising on 'gender issues', rather than being consulted, or included in, the core issues related to peace and conflict." This approach, he added, led to women being stigmatized for working with the Special Envoy's office as mere decoration. A member of TAG, the women's technical advisory group set up by the OSESGY in 2018, further clarified that members of the technical group were initially invited to consult on a number of issues, including opening roads, prisoner exchanges, and the economy. In the aftermath of the Stockholm Agreement in 2018, however, the OSESGY's approach changed, and members of the group were relegated to providing input primarily on 'gender issues,' creating tensions between members of TAG and OSESGY's staff.<sup>[8]</sup>

Misuse of resources and the UN's lack of vision and strategy are the second shortcomings cited by interviewees. According to Sabria al-Thawr, a lecturer at the University of Sana'a and a researcher in the field of Gender and Development, inexperienced gender specialists hired by the OSESGY, excessive bureaucracy, a detachment from Yemeni society, and the imposition of working models that did not fit the country, were failed approaches that alienated women on the ground, especially those working in peacekeeping and mediation roles, who were not supported or, at a minimum, protected.<sup>[9]</sup> These ineffective approaches contributed to distorting the work of women's groups, separating them from women at the grassroots level, limiting women's participation in Track I work, and distancing them from meaningful work in Track II.

<sup>[6]</sup> The UN Security Council adopted UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000. The resolution rests on four pillars: prevention; protection; participation; and relief and recovery. Nine other resolutions were added to UNSC Resolution 1325 by the Security Council between 2000 and 2019 to clarify, expand, and reiterate the main message of 1325. Together they make up the WPS agenda, with a framework, policies, and procedures to address the needs and expertise of women before, during, and after conflict. Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing\\_beyond\\_the\\_Women\\_Peace\\_and\\_Security\\_Agenda\\_in\\_Yemen\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf)

<sup>[7]</sup> Majed Al-Kholidy, Chairman of the Youth Without Borders Organization for Development, author interview via WhatsApp, November 2022.

<sup>[8]</sup> Interview with a member of the UN special envoy's office Technical Advisory Group (TAG) via WhatsApp, August 11, 2023.

<sup>[9]</sup> Sabria al-Thawr, a lecturer at the University of Sana'a and a researcher in the field of Gender and Development, author interview via WhatsApp, November 2022. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/19400>

Third, the tacit acceptance of women's absence from negotiation tables has led to accusations that the UN is acceding to conflicting parties. Women's participation rates in UN-sponsored negotiations continue to plummet, to the extent that women have effectively disappeared from the negotiating scene. The OSESGY has the clout to pressure the parties to include women in their delegations, as seen during the NDC, led by the efforts of Jamal Bin Omar,<sup>[30]</sup> and in other cases when UN envoys stepped up their demands for the inclusion of women.<sup>[31]</sup> But for the most part, UN envoys chose the easy path: postponing women's participation to prioritize demands made by parties to the conflict at the negotiation table.

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<sup>[30]</sup> In 2013, Jamal bin Omar, the first UN special envoy for Yemen, contributed to the design and implementation of the National Dialogue Conference. His interest in amplifying the voices of women during that period, and his support in reaching over 30 percent female representation at the National Dialogue Conference, are still acknowledged by Yemeni women today. In subsequent years, however, this progress began to erode, starting with Bin Omar himself, who excluded women from the Peace and National Partnership Agreement signed between the government and the Houthi movement in September 2014, an exclusionary trend that has continued to date.

<sup>[31]</sup> Bilqees al-Lahbi, an activist and the Gender and Civil Society Advisor at the Sana'a Center, noted that the insistence of UN Envoy Hans Grundberg to include women in the delegations summoned for bilateral consultations at his office in March 2002 directly resulted in the respective parties' inclusion of women in their delegations. She argued that this proved that women's inclusion is not solely at the discretion of local parties, as parties are subject to pressures dictated by the UN and the international community. Author's interview with Bilqees al-Lahbi via WhatsApp, August 15, 2023.

# The Predicament Faced by Yemen's Female Leaders

Last but not least, the unrealistic role Yemeni female leaders are expected to play, and the struggles they continue to face in advocating for their peers, merit a more nuanced analysis. To mitigate the fragmentation of civil society following the exile and targeting of activists, prominent Yemeni women established cross-regional and cross-ideological networks and alliances.<sup>[32]</sup> Some of these networks directly collaborate with the OSESGY and actively work in Track II, and some succeeded in designing a feminist roadmap as a guiding reference for the peace process.<sup>[33]</sup> Their work, however, has been subject to criticism, by Yemeni women and international observers alike.

Among the criticism directed at these women is their disconnection from the Yemeni public,<sup>[34]</sup> and their failure to address women's problems on the ground, represent their needs, and convey these needs to official actors during Track I talks.<sup>[35]</sup> Female activists are often accused of viewing women's rights with condescension, sidelining the demands of women at grassroots levels, and treating empowerment as a privilege only available to a select few. Their work is consequently doubly scrutinized. Women participating in the OSESGY advisory bodies are implicitly expected to fulfill vague criteria such as being 'true representatives' of women on the ground, along with being neutral, not too distant from ordinary women, able to keep up with the demanding pace of work required, yet not too power hungry. When lobbying for women's inclusion in the peace process at the macro level, women are accused of overlooking grassroots issues. Hadil al-Muwofak, a former research fellow at Yemen Policy Center, noted that the ambitious focus on increasing women's presence in the government, or at the negotiation table, meant activists were seen as not prioritizing causes that would better connect them to the Yemeni public,<sup>[36]</sup> such as the case of Sarah Alwan.

Yet, when female leaders take up the daily struggles that are being faced by women on the ground, they risk being sidelined on political platforms for addressing issues that are not related to, or relevant to, the immediate concerns of the peace process. Female leaders are thus stuck in a vicious circle of cause and effect, where they are held to unreasonably high standards, which are impossible to meet and which, by design, inhibit effective advocacy that could lead to change. The irony here is not lost on anyone. The high expectations imposed on women are by no means imposed on men, who comfortably sit at negotiation tables, with no questions asked regarding their competency, or whether they legitimately represent the Yemeni people.

<sup>[32]</sup> Fatima Mutahar, "New Networks for Yemeni Women in Peacebuilding," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 15, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15282>

<sup>[33]</sup> Maryam Alkubati, "Women's Voices in the Peace Process: Priorities, Recommendations and Mechanisms for Effective Inclusion," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 25, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/19400>

<sup>[34]</sup> Feedback reiterated by all interviewees cited in a recent study; Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing\\_beyond\\_the\\_Women\\_Peace\\_and\\_Security\\_Agenda\\_in\\_Yemen\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf)

<sup>[35]</sup> Hadil al-Mawofak, "Engaging Women in Yemen's Peace Process Requires Better Alliances and Networks," Yemen Policy Center, October 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/engaging-women-in-yemens-peace-process-requires-better-alliances-and-networks/>

<sup>[36]</sup> Hadil al-Mawofak, a former research fellow at Yemen Policy Center, author interview via Zoom, November 2022

# Women Can't Fight this Battle Alone: Rethinking the Current Approach

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On July 17, the leader of the Houthis, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, advised women to stay away from the public sphere and leave “communication with foreigners” up to men, while urging Yemeni men to “protect their women.”<sup>[37]</sup> This kind of demagoguery, pervasive across the country’s social and political spectrum, is steadily threatening to erase women from public life. To stop the current course of oppression, women, and their supporters must come together and refocus their efforts to fight for their inclusion in public life.

To start with, female leaders who represent Yemeni women need to ensure they stay connected to their peers and audience, and remain aware of the wishes of Yemeni women and men on the ground. They must amplify their words, their hopes, and echo these when asking for women’s representation within decision-making circles. For this to happen, Yemeni society at large, along with the international community, must however rethink the unrealistic expectations they have placed on Yemeni female leaders to date, and recognize the value of women who work at both the policy and grassroots level. Although not mutually exclusive, a change in the current state of affairs will require women to work at both levels, and not always at the same time.

Second, to mitigate the threat of erasure from public life, Yemeni female leaders cannot fight this battle alone. Just as women leaders are expected to understand their peers on the ground, the UN, along with the international community, must make concerted efforts to use language that resonates with, and speaks to, the people they are trying to serve. This they must do by prioritizing the knowledge of Yemenis and by using credible data that comes from the field. At the same time, and with renewed strength of purpose, the UN must be genuine in its commitment to involve women in peace negotiations. This can only happen if the UN decides to adopt a clear strategy of inclusion, and live up to its responsibility to implement UNSC resolution 1325, not as an addendum expendable at any given time, but as an integral part of its mandate.

Third, the role played by regional actors, and their influence on Yemeni parties to the conflict when it comes to women’s rights, must be given more attention. At home, some of the regional players deeply embroiled in Yemen’s war are flaunting the liberal measures they have taken to empower women, keen to change their image from one that subjugates women to one that champions them. The credibility of their allegedly liberal policies on women must be scrutinized against the rising tide of suppression of women in Yemen. If genuinely interested in women’s rights, regional forces involved in Yemen must pressure the parties they fund and support to include women in the peacemaking processes and put an end to oppressive measures targeting them. Advocates for Yemeni women, meanwhile, including Yemeni women themselves, must also start to pressure regional actors with the same rigor they pressure and address the international community.

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<sup>[37]</sup> As stated on the Houthi group’s website: <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/615269>

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