

# **Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Yemeni Women in Diplomacy**

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**Cover photo:** Amat Al-Alim Alsoswa at the Yemen International Forum, Stockholm, June 17, 2022, Sana'a Center photo.



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.

*"Our main challenge as women in Yemen is simply the fact that we are women," - Sahar Ghanem, Yemeni Ambassador to the Netherlands.<sup>[1]</sup>*

*"How can women have a strong presence [in diplomacy] when we aren't in decision-making positions at all?" - Female Yemeni diplomat.<sup>[2]</sup>*

The underrepresentation of women in Yemen's political and public sphere existed before the war and has only worsened due to the ongoing conflict over the past decade. The Yemeni government formed as part of the Riyadh Agreement in 2020 did not include **female ministers**, marking the first time women had been entirely excluded from a cabinet in nearly two decades. In a context of escalating tension and polarization, this marginalization extends to all other structures, where vulnerable groups, particularly women, continue to be overlooked. In the current political framework established in 2022, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), which is composed of eight members, is entirely male, while the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission (CRC), an advisory body to the PLC, includes only five women out of 50 members. Yemen's parliament currently **has no women**, placing the country at the bottom of the list for female representation in government bodies. Supporting and empowering women is no longer a priority for Yemeni political parties either, having been sidelined in favor of armed political factions.

Against this backdrop, the historically male-dominated field of diplomacy remains one of the hardest fields for women to break into, not just in Yemen but around the globe. In recognition of these challenges, the UN marks June 24 as the "**International Day of Women in Diplomacy**." Yemeni novelist, writer, and diplomat **Ramziya al-Eryani** became the first woman to enter Yemen's diplomatic corps in the late 1980s. Research on this topic shows **fluctuating trends** of women's participation in Yemen's diplomatic service, but the overall picture is one of persistently low numbers of women in this field.<sup>[3]</sup> Today, there are only a handful of Yemeni women in the diplomatic field at a time when women are perhaps most needed, given their proven track record in **peace-building** and advocacy at the community level. This article sheds light on the experiences of Yemeni women in this field, drawing on interviews with prominent diplomats who are currently serving or have served in Yemen's diplomatic services.<sup>[4]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Interview with Sahar Ghanem, Yemen's ambassador to the Netherlands, September 2024.

<sup>[2]</sup> Interview with a female diplomat, September 2024.

<sup>[3]</sup> A study by Sweden's University of Gothenburg indicates that Yemen had zero female ambassadors until 1998. That rose to 22 percent in 2019 but declined to just 6 percent in 2021. See, "The GenDip Dataset on Gender and Diplomatic Representation," University of Gothenburg, <https://www.gu.se/en/gendip/the-gendip-dataset-on-gender-and-diplomatic-representation>. However, figures shared with the authors by an employee in the Personnel Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs say otherwise. It indicated that the percentage of females appointed as ambassadors was 7.3% in 2019 compared to men. The figure remained the same in 2021, only to increase slightly in 2022 (8%).

<sup>[4]</sup> Those interviewed were: Sahar Ghanem, Yemen's ambassador to the Netherlands; Asmahan Al-Touqi, Yemen's ambassador to Italy; Arwa Ali Noman, an ambassador-at-large and deputy head of mission at the Yemeni embassy in London; Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, a former ambassador and former Minister of Human Rights; Deputy Foreign Minister Mustafa al-Noman; and a female diplomat who requested to remain anonymous.



## Gender Discrimination in Diplomacy

Gender inequality and discriminatory practices against women are prevalent across all power structures in Yemen. Such an environment makes it difficult for women to break the glass ceiling and attain decision-making positions. The challenges faced in entering a male-dominated field are deeply rooted in cultural norms and traditional social perceptions defining women's societal roles. As a result, the widely held view in the country's political circles is that women are not qualified for senior leadership roles.

Mustafa al-Noman, a seasoned Yemeni diplomat currently serving as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriate Affairs, noted that Yemeni "customs and traditions prevented women from engaging in the diplomatic field because this job requires travel. Social barriers were greater than legal hurdles, but the government had no interest in encouraging women." This was the case across the country before unification. "Even in South Yemen, where women enjoyed a higher degree of freedom, no female ambassador was appointed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," he added, highlighting how the progressive reforms adopted in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY) while offering some freedoms for women, did not necessarily translate into genuine gender equality due to the lack of women in decision-making bodies.

Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, a trailblazer in diplomacy, said, "societal structures have often been influenced by factors that were often much stronger than political will, such as the fact that women could not travel alone or even open bank accounts in their name."<sup>[5]</sup> Alsoswa served as ambassador to Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands from 2000 to 2003, and as Minister of Human Rights from 2003-2006. Reflecting on her experience, she noted that "additional prerequisites are added to the list of expectations for women, which demand that you have miraculous powers or superhuman abilities."<sup>[6]</sup> Asmahan al-Touqi, Yemen's current ambassador to Italy, echoed this sentiment. "Expectations for performance and professional discipline placed on women often exceed those imposed on their male counterparts. While most women entering the diplomatic service are already highly committed to these standards, the heightened expectations pressure them to overachieve, justify their presence, and prove their worth constantly,"<sup>[7]</sup> she said.

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<sup>[5]</sup> Interview with Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, former ambassador and minister, September 2024.

<sup>[6]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[7]</sup> Interview with Asmahan Al-Touqi, ambassador to Italy, April 2025.

## Systemic Marginalization and Stereotyping

Interviewees agreed that systematic marginalization of women is firmly in place in the diplomatic world and elsewhere, whereby women are often confined to limited, uninspiring roles that fail to nurture their skills or empower them to assume decision-making positions. “I have nothing to do with diplomatic functions such as attending large events.”<sup>[8]</sup> said one female diplomat. Alsoswa describes the dominant mindset in these institutions as embodying “traditional male mindsets at best.”<sup>[9]</sup>

When women enter the diplomatic service, having overcome considerable obstacles to enter in the first place, they typically encounter additional challenges. Many reported struggling with building networks within the ministry and internationally during their assignments. Ambassador Al-Touqi pointed out that because women are a minority in the ministry, their support and networking systems are often not as strong as those available to their male colleagues. Sahar Ghanem, Yemen's current ambassador to the Netherlands, added, “Women find it difficult to network and build relationships due to the complex nature of these relationships. Being a woman, you are not always taken seriously.” Additionally, the limited number of women in these environments can restrict female diplomats' ability to move and operate effectively. The scarcity of women also limits opportunities for mutual support and solidarity that could otherwise flourish if their numbers were more significant.

The stereotypes associated with women also influence their positions within official bodies. Deputy Foreign Minister Al-Noman noted that “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs failed to provide an encouraging environment for women, so most of them worked in internal departments, such as the Protocol Department or the Office of the Minister, rather than holding leading positions.” This was true when the state was still functioning, and the situation has deteriorated even further since the onset of the war.

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<sup>[8]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[9]</sup> Interview with Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, former ambassador and minister, September 2024.

## Political Power, Bureaucratic Red Tape, and War

Former ambassador and minister Alsoswa highlighted a growing trend in Yemen over the past few decades where families are increasingly encouraging girls' education and enrollment in higher education, as well as women entering professions such as teaching and public health. She observed, however, that women's participation in public life in Yemen often fluctuates in response to changes in political regimes. "Whenever there is a slight expansion of opportunities, you find that political spaces are simultaneously shrinking, and this, in turn, limits women's participation."<sup>[10]</sup> She emphasizes that women's involvement in public life cannot be separated from the political and social developments occurring in the country at any given time.

Deputy Foreign Minister Noman underscored how political decision-making in Yemen has often been selective regarding the inclusion of women in diplomacy. "There has been no genuine strategic move to strengthen the role of women," he said, adding that the war has only worsened this weak political will. "Since 2015, there is no real political will to support women in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Appointments are based on patronage, cronyism, and allegiances, rather than competence." The bureaucratic structures within official institutions obstruct women's progress in the diplomatic field. What should serve as a formal administrative tool has become a systematic mechanism for excluding women from decision-making positions: One female diplomat remarked, "I faced hurdles in making decisions due to delays in procedures attributed to bureaucracy and poor practices."<sup>[11]</sup> Nepotism further compounds this issue. Arwa Noman, ambassador-at-large and deputy head of mission at the Yemeni embassy in London, added, "during my time abroad, appointments and promotions were based on personal connections, and these appointments usually favored men."

The absence of centralized political authority has also diminished the effectiveness of Yemeni diplomacy internationally, resulting in a lack of Yemen's voices in forums and platforms abroad. In a political climate characterized by corruption and division, diplomacy has not been used as a strategic tool to mobilize international support nor provide an accurate narrative of the situation in Yemen. Instead, the marginalization and polarization within diplomatic establishments have deepened. For instance, the already fragile and corrupt institutional structures within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have collapsed with the war, affecting the Ministry's hiring and promotion practices. «Parameters or exams to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not in place in the early days," explained Deputy Foreign Minister Al-Noman. "Later on, things routinely started to take a disciplined and bureaucratic approach. Selections were made based on merit. But as the conflict escalated, these criteria were dropped. There are no exams anymore," he added.

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<sup>[10]</sup> Interview with Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, former ambassador and minister, September 2024.

<sup>[11]</sup> Interview with a female diplomat, September 2024.

## **Yemeni Women's Future in Diplomacy: What Can Be Done and How?**

The outlook for women's active participation in the public sphere remains concerning. The war's repercussions have disproportionately affected women, exacerbating long-standing challenges that they faced even before the war. This has resulted in a systemic exclusion of women from the public sphere, increased violence against them across all settings, a further shrinking of the already limited space available to them, and restrictions on their freedom and movement, all of which directly impact their daily lives.

The diplomatic field in Yemen is no exception. However, including women in diplomacy has catalyzed more effective and inclusive international relations. As the United Nations noted, "Women bring immense benefits to diplomacy. Their leadership styles, expertise, and priorities broaden the scope of issues under consideration and the quality of outcomes." In a country like Yemen, women can effectively play key diplomatic roles and contribute to strengthening support for Yemen in general and the peace process in particular.

Ensuring greater representation of Yemeni women in the diplomatic corps is crucial for achieving meaningful change. This can be accomplished by adopting clear policies mandating a specific percentage of female appointments, implementing comprehensive strategic plans to reform hiring and promotion mechanisms, and removing the bureaucratic red tape that can serve as barriers against women. Investing in women's empowerment during diplomatic events and missions is another key step, providing opportunities to build expertise, expand their networks, and bolster their meaningful participation in decision-making.

Crucially, women's representation must go beyond being merely symbolic; it must have a meaningful impact on their careers and enable them to wield influence effectively. This approach will ultimately serve to strengthen Yemen's overall diplomatic capacity and efforts.

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**Essa Al-Qadasy** is a researcher and youth activist specializing in public policy and peacebuilding. He is dedicated to empowering youth and women in conflict-affected contexts. His professional experience includes developing and implementing programs and initiatives that focus on capacity building and creating effective opportunities for participation in decision-making processes and public influence. Eisa has over eight years of experience in project management, dialogue facilitation, civil society engagement, and training.

*This analysis 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.*



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