

Forgotten Victims of Yemen's War:

The Plight of the Muhammashat



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Cover photo: A woman from the Muhammasheen community carries food on her head inside a camp west of Taiz city on February 21, 2021 // Sana'a Center Photo by Ahmed Al-Basha.




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Executive Summary

Members of the *muhammasheen* community remain among the most vulnerable victims of systemic injustice and suffering in Yemen, a situation made worse by the war. Ostracized and disparaged, the community's women and girls (muhammashat) are particularly vulnerable. The nature of their work, which commonly entails begging, street-sweeping, and vending, brings them into public spaces, putting them at risk of exploitation, including sexual and gender-based violence. As the upheaval of war in Yemen disrupts law enforcement and customary norms, and many men from this community have either lost their jobs or joined the frontlines, reports of muhammashat experiencing harassment and sexual abuse are on the increase while perpetrators continue to act with impunity.

Based on interviews with local activists, researchers, lawyers, security and judicial officials, tribal leaders, and members of the *muhammasheen* community in Taiz, Abyan, Aden, and Al-Dhalea governorates, this paper examines the rise of violence, including sexual violence, against muhammashat. It responds to calls from concerned activists to highlight their plight and shed light on a reported increase in incidents of harassment and abuse, including ones perpetrated by tribesmen and armed groups affiliated with the parties to the conflict. This report is also an attempt to address the lack of data on the subject, owing to the topic's sensitivity and the country's prevailing security situation.

To provide a better understanding of the cultural context that has given rise to a surge of harassment against the *muhammasheen* community, this report first explores the erosion of tribal protection that was extended in the past and the change in the relationship between tribes and members of this community that have occurred since the war began. It then explores the failings of law enforcement authorities at large to protect the rights of members of the *muhammasheen* community, detailing distressing cases of young female victims of sexual abuse whose aggressors have not been brought to justice and whose families have instead suffered extortion and harassment. While constitutionally, Yemeni law makes no difference between the different social classes, this report demonstrates how racism and social discrimination remain embedded in Yemen's security and judicial system. To conclude, it offers a set of recommendations derived from extensive discussions held with members of the *muhammasheen* community, community leaders, security officers, and members of the judiciary.

Select Recommendations

To the Office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen:

- Exert pressure on the parties to the conflict to include the *muhammasheen* community in decision-making and the peace process.

To Relevant UN Agencies Working with Vulnerable Communities:

- Build the capacity of activists, researchers, and journalists from the *muhammasheen* community and support other local and international organizations working to empower minorities.

To the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights:

- Monitor and document the challenges faced by marginalized groups. Focus on improved data collection in cases of sexual abuse of muhammashat and support research initiatives that identify best practices and effective interventions for supporting victims.

To the Government of Yemen:

- Activate legislation that criminalizes racism against the *muhammasheen* community and upholds the values promoted in Yemen's constitution, which treats all segments of Yemeni society as equal and rejects the preference of one group over another.

To Local Civil Society Organizations:

- Engage and involve members of the *muhammasheen* community and work towards their just integration in society, empowering them socially, economically, and politically to secure the rights accorded to them by Yemeni laws and the constitution. Pay special attention to empowering young women and girls in the Muhamasheen community to enhance their protection from abuse.

1. Introduction

The *muhammasheen* are a marginalized community, widely regarded as the lowest social class in Yemen.^[1] The term *muhammasheen*, meaning “the marginalized,” was more recently introduced to replace the derogatory label — akhdam (servant). Their origin has long been a subject of debate, with some tracing this ostracized community to the fall of the Najahi dynasty — of African origin — which ruled Yemen between the 11th and 12th centuries and was headquartered in the city of Zabid.^[2] Others contend they are descendants of an Abyssinian army that invaded Yemen in the 6th century. Despite widespread speculation challenging their Yemeni identity,^[3] the ongoing dispute over their ethnic origin is based purely on racial grounds.^[4] The exact population of the *muhammasheen* is unknown. Estimates suggest there are anywhere between 500,000 to 3.5 million,^[5] the majority of whom face widespread discrimination and deprivation of education, healthcare, and basic services such as water and electricity, and many of whom are forced to live in makeshift slums, putting them permanently at risk of forced displacement. Despite the law officially granting them the same rights as all other citizens, the *muhammasheen* continue to be relegated to specific social roles, often carrying out tasks that are viewed as inferior, like collecting trash, cleaning the streets, and other jobs that are undervalued in the eyes of society.^[6] Such disregard continues even in times of conflict, where men from the *muhammasheen* community are exploited on the military frontlines by the parties to the conflict.

Activist Huda Saif maintains that for decades, successive traditional authorities ruling Yemen have distributed power in a way that undercuts the cultural and societal value of the *muhammasheen* community, leading to their isolation from society at large and making them vulnerable to economic exploitation and systemic racial discrimination.^[7] Long-standing cultural norms and systems maintain a deep divide between classes in Yemeni society, and the *muhammasheen* continue to face significant barriers in accessing equitable economic opportunities and escaping the endless cycle of financial exploitation^[8], and violence perpetrated against them.^[9]

^[1] Yemen's social stratification is influenced by a caste-like system at the top of which is the sayyed (claiming direct descent from the prophet Mohammed) and at the bottom the *muhammasheen*.

^[2] Aisha al-Warraq, “The Historic and Systematic Marginalization of Yemen's *Muhammasheen* Community,” Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7490>

^[3] A widespread belief among many Yemenis is that the *muhammasheen* are not of Yemeni origin, which challenges their sense of national identity.

^[4] Helen Lackner, “Understanding the Yemeni crisis: the transformation of tribal roles in recent decades,” Working Paper, Durham Middle East Papers, Sir William Luce Fellowship Paper, Durham University, August 16, 2016, <https://dro.dur.ac.uk/19545/1/19545.pdf>

^[5] Jean-Nicolas Beuze, “Yemen's ‘marginalized ones’ endure hunger, displacement,” UNHCR, February 4, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/2/601bcbad4/yemens-marginalized-ones-endure-hunger-displacement.html>

^[6] Unlike other groups from lower social strata, such as Al-Mazaynah (which includes butchers and barbers), from which some members have managed to climb the social ladder to become ministers, academics, and politicians, it remains particularly difficult for *muhammasheen* to overcome their stigma. This is largely based on the fact that they face racial discrimination based on the color of their skin. Even educated members of the *muhammasheen* with university degrees, are discriminated against.

^[7] Huda Seif, “The Accursed Minority: The Ethno-Cultural Persecution of Al-Akhdam in the Republic of Yemen: A Documentary and Advocacy Project,” Muslim World Journal of Human Rights (2)1 2005: 1-40, p.4, <https://philpapers.org/rec/SEITAM>

^[8] Ibid.

^[9] Rania El Rajji, “Even war discriminates: Yemen's minorities, exiled at home,” Briefing, Minority Rights Group International, January 2016, <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-brief-yemen-jan16.pdf>

The community's vulnerability is arguably further exacerbated by the lack of protection. The denial of their Yemeni origins by society means they are kept outside the tribal structure in Yemen and the protection it affords to members of the tribe and those taken under its wing.^[10] As this report will explore, the relationship between the *muhammasheen* and tribes, and between the *muhammasheen* and the state, has historically fluctuated according to political shifts in the country. In the past, *muhammasheen* received a degree of protection from tribes, albeit limited. Unique to Yemen's tribal system, this came in the form of specific rulings that protected *muhammasheen* who worked for the tribe. However, the last ten years of conflict have given rise to significant shifts impacting the *muhammasheen* community. Some young men have joined military groups and are bearing arms, an affront to tribal leaders, who have traditionally denied the bearing of arms to *muhammasheen*. In addition, the collapse of the judicial system and traditional systems governing tribes^[11] has also led to the collapse of tribal protection – which was already weak to begin with.

Against this backdrop, women and girls from the *muhammasheen* community, hereafter *muhammashat* (feminine plural), face double vulnerability, experiencing violence that is perceived as justified by the blind stereotyping of the broader community and its women.^[12] *Muhammashat* are said to be lacking Islamic virtues in comparison to other Yemeni women, increasing the incidence of harassment and violations committed against them.^[13] The nature of their work, which commonly entails begging, street-sweeping, and vending, brings them into public spaces and increases their risk of harassment and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence.^[14] Incidents of violations against women and girls in the *muhammasheen* community, even at gunpoint, have been reported by concerned activists working on the protection of the *muhammasheen* community. They report that some of these violations have been committed by tribesmen or members of armed groups controlled by the parties to the conflict.^[15] Despite the dearth of systematic data and statistics on the number of these incidents, violations against *muhammashat* are said to have increased since 2015,^[16] including in areas such as Aden, Taiz, and Hudaydah, which have been directly affected by conflict.^[17]

^[10] Ibid.

^[11] Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Peacebuilding in the Time of War: Tribal Cease-Fire & De-Escalation Mechanisms in Yemen," Middle East Institute, April 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-04/Peacebuilding%20in%20the%20Time%20of%20War.pdf>

^[12] Ibid.

^[13] Najwa Adra, "Social Exclusion Analysis – Yemen," Department for International Development and the World Bank, January 2006, <http://www.najwaadra.net/yemense.pdf>

^[14] Marta Colburn, Mohammed al-Harbi, and Sumaya Saleem, "Bringing Forth the Voices of the *Muhammasheen*," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

^[15] The author documented ten girls who were reportedly violated by tribesmen in Taiz and Abyan, as detailed in consultations with several activists defending the rights of the *muhammasheen* community. For security reasons, many interviewees asked to remain anonymous.

^[16] Ibid.

^[17] Rania El Rajji, "'Even war discriminates': Yemen's minorities, exiled at home," Briefing, Minority Rights Group International, January 2016, <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-brief-yemen-jan16.pdf>

1.1 Methodology

This report relies on 22 interviews conducted in Taiz, Abyan, Aden, and Al-Dhalea governorates with members of the *muhammasheen* community, security and judicial officials, tribal leaders, activists, researchers, and lawyers. Interviews were also conducted with the families of victims of sexual and gender-based violence from Abyan and Taiz. The interviews, conducted between November 2021 and March 2022, focused on the impact of the conflict on violations against muhammashat. The interviews explored the collapse of the system of protection that was provided by Yemeni tribes to the *muhammasheen*, how this has changed during the ongoing conflict, and how some of the community's youth started to bear arms. They also looked into the impact of the collapse of the rule of law, the collusion and corruption of security entities and armed tribal groups, and the resulting violations against muhammashat.

Owing to the topic's sensitivity and the country's prevailing security situation, many activists and individuals interviewed for this paper requested anonymity. The size of the interview sample was limited due to the challenges in gathering information. Some interviewees had reservations about disclosing information, and difficulties were predictably encountered while trying to secure interviews with female victims of sexual abuse. Victims feared being stigmatized and had concerns about possible revenge by the perpetrators. Some interviews, however, were conducted with relatives of the victims and activists in the *muhammasheen* community. The inability of the researcher to get information from members of armed tribal groups to probe violations allegedly perpetrated against muhammashat limits the analytical framework of this report.

The topic's sensitivity also meant no interviews were conducted in Houthi-controlled areas, which would have carried considerable risk. However, violations against the muhammashat are believed to be widespread in the country. In August 2024, the body of a young schoolgirl from the *muhammasheen* community was found in Sana'a, but the authorities failed to provide any details on the mysterious circumstances under which she died.^[18]

^[18] "The body of a girl was found in Sana'a and the militia authority did not provide any details despite the passage of days after the crime [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, August 17, 2024, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/300501>

2. Erosion of Tribal Protection: Increased Vulnerability of *Muhammasheen*

“Yemeni society is afraid that the unity of the *muhammasheen* will lead them to take revenge for the decades of racial discrimination and oppression they faced.”^[19]

Tribal Sheikh from Al-Dhalea governorate

Under the presidency of Salem Rubai, who ruled South Yemen between 1969 and 1978, the term *khadem* (servant) was criminalized, as Rubai's administration worked to achieve greater equality to build the political base of the Yemeni Socialist Party.^[20] Despite the pervasive culture of isolating *muhammasheen* communities, there were attempts at integration at varying levels, particularly in areas like Aden, and Hudaydah in North Yemen, where racism against the community was less prevalent.^[21] *Muhammasheen* were also offered some degree of protection from tribes, though this was limited and primarily based on shared interests. Urbanization, driven in part by migration to cities to escape the suffocating rural social class system, put an end to this.^[22] Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's tribalization^[23] of the state led to many changes in the role and structure of tribes, as did the onset of conflict in 2015. Since then, tribal customs and traditions have become even more fragile, leading to social disintegration.^[24]

Traditionally, Yemeni tribes have played a vital role in resolving social tensions, sometimes extending to the *muhammasheen*. According to a tribal sheikh from Al-Dhalea, if a tribesman attacked a member of the *muhammasheen* working on a farm belonging to a leader of another tribe, it would be considered a violation against that very tribal leader, and redress for the victim would be demanded.^[25] Grants were sometimes given to *muhammasheen* in exchange for their services, a relationship that was primarily based on mutual benefit.^[26] Although they were never allowed to own agricultural land, a member of the *muhammasheen* community said that the “*akhdam*” would typically guard the homes and farms of tribal sheiks, in addition to helping them bring in wanted individuals who have had run-ins with tribes. In exchange for these services, the “*akhdam*” received protection.^[27]

^[19] Interview with Sheikh Yassee n al-Wajih, a tribal sheikh from Al-Dhalea, April 15, 2022.

^[20] Marta Colburn, Mohammed al-Harbi, and Sumaya Saleem, “Bringing Forth the Voices of the Muhammashat,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf; Najwa Adra, “Social Exclusion Analysis – Yemen,” DFID and the World Bank, January 2006, <http://www.najwaadra.net/yemense.pdf>

^[21] The port city of Hudaydah has long been a center of trade and cultural exchange, which means its residents are more receptive to ethnic and cultural diversity, including members of marginalized communities who worked in ports or maritime businesses. Aden, on the other hand, was ruled by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), which adopted socialist policies aimed at reducing caste distinctions and segregation. This had an impact on local marginalized communities such as the *muhammasheen*, providing them with better socio-economic rights than those in North Yemen. Moreover, the *muhammasheen* have been better integrated into society through education, employment, and social service policies, resulting in less racism compared to northern areas that remained under a more traditional and, arguably, discriminatory tribal system.

^[22] Marta Colburn, Mohammed al-Harbi, and Sumaya Saleem, “Bringing Forth the Voices of the Muhammashat,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

^[23] The patronage system of Saleh's regime relied on strategically leveraging tribal loyalties to consolidate power.

^[24] Rim Mugahed, “Tribes and the State in Yemen,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/16156>

^[25] Interview with a tribal sheikh from Al-Dhalea, January 21, 2022.

^[26] Ibid.

^[27] Interview with a member of the *muhammasheen* community, January 21, 2022.

A tribal sheikh from Taiz attested to the existence of tribal customs that protected the khadem (singular of *akhdam*). Describing it as a “quid pro quo”^[28] relationship, he said “akhdam” that worked for the sheikh were, in turn, provided with protection from attacks in their workplaces.^[29] With regard to women belonging to the *muhammasheen* community, the tribes afforded them some protection if a relative of theirs worked for the tribe, but this was only done to safeguard the dignity and reputation of the tribe and did not offer the same level of protection extended to women belonging to the tribe.^[30]

A tribal leader from Abyan governorate noted that after Yemen's unification in 1990, the protective role performed by tribes was to some degree curtailed by the growing state presence. “Tribes no longer had an active role in protecting other groups, except in some areas.”^[31] Another tribal sheikh from Abyan concurred. “The forms of protection that tribal customs and laws provided have become very fragile since the outbreak of the war [...] The security situation and the conflict have weakened social customs and the law, all of which are bent in the interest of armed groups, especially when the matter concerns women from the *muhammasheen* community.”^[32] Lamenting the new status quo, he said, “we had a customary law based on morals and principles, as tribes do not attack the weak, and this was the case when tribes were in control.”^[33]

Since 2015, some young members of the *muhammasheen* community have joined the fighting, which has led to tensions between the community and tribes. In the words of Sheikh Faisal Abdelraqib al-Fadhli, from Taiz governorate, “Their departure from tribal compliance and involvement in the military has created a gap [...] and fear among them [tribal leaders], that they are losing control and that they [*muhammasheen*] will take revenge against society, weakening the tribal role in protecting them.”^[34]

A tribal sheikh from Abyan governorate said that “before the war, only tribesmen were allowed to carry arms [...], but since the war began, some *muhammasheen* have started to take up arms, emerging as a strong contender to tribes and leading to the reorganization of the relationship between the *muhammasheen* and the tribes.”^[35] He added that armed groups find it easier to take advantage of the *muhammasheen*, who, lacking the protection of a functioning state, cannot secure their rights. By contrast, tribesmen still benefit from a code of conduct governed by the customs and traditions of their tribe. “Tribes have given up on the *muhammasheen* because of their rebellion against tribal customs and traditions, as *muhammasheen* no longer

^[28] Interview with a tribal sheikh from Taiz, January 21, 2022.

^[29] The sheikh expanded and said that protection was extended but only to some degree. If a member of the “akhdam” was murdered for example, killing a tribesman from another tribe as revenge was not permitted.

^[30] Ibid.

^[31] Interview with a tribal sheikh from Abyan, February 3, 2022.

^[32] Interview with a tribal sheikh from Abyan, January 1, 2022.

^[33] Ibid.

^[34] Interview with Sheikh Faisal Abdelraqib al-Fadhli, a tribal sheikh from Taiz, January 21, 2022.

^[35] Interview with a tribal sheikh from Abyan, February 15, 2022.

obey the tribal sheikhs or conform to the traditions of their forefathers." Yaseen al-Wajih, a tribal sheikh from Al-Dhalea, believes that continued racial discrimination against the *muhammasheen* is intended to guarantee that they remain under the control of the tribes, who gain from their exploitation, and out of fear of their revenge.^[36]

The above factors likely play a role in the reported increase of incitement and violations against the community.^[37] Youths from the *muhammasheen* community know the consequences of bearing arms but note that it is the lesser of two evils. A young member of the community in Al-Dhalea governorate who joined the military said, "If the young men do not join the military, they will become bandits, so it is better for them to join the military for a source of income in these difficult conditions. Regardless of that, this might impact our status in the future, but it is the only option and the only source of income."^[38]

^[36] Interview with Sheikh Yaseen al-Wajih, a tribal sheikh from Al-Dhalea, April 15, 2022.

^[37] "Statement on the Violations and Incitement Against the *Muhammasheen* [AR]," Insaf Defending Freedoms and Minorities, August 25, 2019, <https://insaf-ye.org/ar/archives/326>

^[38] Interview with a member of the *muhammasheen* community, April 5, 2022.

3. A Rise in the Abuse and Exploitation of Muhammashat

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2015, Yemeni women have suffered disproportionately from the impact of the war, and the burden has been heaviest on the most vulnerable.^[39] In her work on gender inequality in Yemen, prominent scholar Sheila Carapico observes how women in the *muhammasheen* community are marginalized and relegated to the bottom of Yemen's social class system. The only resource available to them is their labor, which society undervalues because of stereotypes held against them.^[40] While for some, the war has brought opportunities to break into the employment market, including in non-traditional sectors, for uneducated and illiterate women, these jobs have often been low-paid and precarious.^[41] An activist from Abyan notes that many men in the *muhammasheen* community have either lost jobs or have gone to the frontlines. The women, left behind, must take care of their families and are often forced to beg in markets and villages or work in sanitation services. Some of them, she added, work as maids to secure an income for their families. These occupations have made many of them vulnerable to rape and sexual harassment.^[42] The risk of harassment is heightened by the fact that they work in public spaces and in perceived low-status jobs such as street sweeping, which are often carried out at night.^[43]

Muhammashat are also discriminated against in other ways. Their high level of displacement makes them particularly vulnerable in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), exposing them to increased risks to their safety. A report by Minority Rights Groups International notes how some displaced muhammashat preferred to return to their original encampments, even if these were still active war zones, "because they felt that the treatment and living conditions in the host areas and camps were so demeaning that they preferred the bombs."^[44] Often lacking identification papers, muhammashat are also discriminated against by tribal sheikhs or community leaders in charge of distributing aid. Worst of all, being both women and minorities, they are at increased risk of sexual violence. A female activist from Taiz governorate talked about the rise of sexual violence against muhammashat, citing the case of a young girl from the community who was assaulted in 2023 by a civilian under the protection of security officers after he had lured her to bring water.^[45]

^[39] Rania El Rajji, "Even war discriminates: Yemen's minorities, exiled at home," Briefing, Minority Rights Groups International, January 2016, <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-brief-yemen-jan16.pdf>

^[40] Sheila Carapico, "Gender and Status Inequalities in Yemen: Honour, Economics, and Politics" in *Patriarchy and Development: Women's Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Valentine M. Moghadam, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) pp. 80-98.

^[41] Fawziah al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett, and Shams Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/8480>

^[42] Interview with an activist from Abyan, January 12, 2022.

^[43] "Everyday Brings A New Livelihood: Women's Economic Empowerment in Yemen," Multiple Authors, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 31, 2024, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/23122>

^[44] Rania El Rajji, "Even war discriminates: Yemen's minorities, exiled at home," Briefing, Minority Rights Groups International, January 2016, <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-brief-yemen-jan16.pdf>

^[45] Interview with an activist from Taiz, May 20, 2022

Adel Faraj, a human rights activist in Aden, says that one of the biggest reasons for violence against the *muhammasheen* community, especially its women, is the “pejorative view of them by society.”^[46] Society holds them responsible for the conditions they live in, often accusing them of “having no religious scruples or morals,” to the extent they are even stripped of their Muslim identity. “Women from the *muhammasheen* community are the weakest link because they are out in the streets, and sometimes until late at night, which is stigmatized in a conservative society like Yemen,” continued Faraj, adding that many resort to begging to survive. In many cases, young girls are married early to protect them from the humiliation of the streets. But Faraj said early marriage had not curbed the level of violations against muhammashat, as they still have to contribute to making ends meet from a very early age and often don’t have time to raise their children. All of these challenges have led to these women living under intense psychological pressure, said Faraj.

An activist and member of the *muhammasheen* community from Abyan said that since the onset of the conflict, “many muhammashat were subject, and continue to be subject, to violations and harassment by tribesmen and various armed groups in different parts of the country.” Many of these incidents, she added, have been reported in the governorates of Taiz and Abyan, where “the rate of rape has increased since the outbreak of the war.”^[47] Violence against muhammashat is not confined to members outside their community but also happens from within. According to Samrah Qayed, a lawyer and member of the community, “the problem is that male members of the *muhammasheen* community and non-marginalized community members both partake in abusing muhammashat. We cannot blame just Yemeni society for abusing dark-skinned women because there are those from their own community who do the same, but the violations and incidents of rape that muhammashat are victims of are [primarily] from outside their community.”^[48]

^[46] Interview with Adel Faraj, a human rights activist from Aden, May 11, 2022.

^[47] Interview with an activist and member of the *muhammasheen* community, April 10, 2022.

^[48] Interview with lawyer Samra Qayed, November 18, 2022.

4. An Absence of Security and Justice

“We are a vulnerable community, and we do not have the power to defend ourselves, tribal connections, or authority, so society has taken away our rights. A group of youth raped Rasayel, and the criminals violently attacked our home, and I was jailed in the security directorate for almost three months.”

Haytham Mo hamme d Saif, uncle of a young muhammashat rape victim.^[49]

Despite the harsh realities faced by muhammashat, security and judicial authorities interviewed in Abyan governorate maintain that all civilians are equal in the eyes of the law. A prosecutor working in Abyan stated that he hadn't received a single case involving the rape of *muhammasheen* women or girls or any other violations, either from legal entities or individuals.^[50] This, however, is likely due to the fact that the *muhammasheen* are less inclined to take these cases to the authorities. A former staff member in the prosecutor's office in Abyan noted that the *muhammasheen* community has long suffered marginalization but that in southern governorates, there is more legal awareness, and so *muhammasheen* who have been violated or oppressed can file a complaint and will be treated just like any other civilian. “These cases are dealt with unless there is interference from someone in power, of course.”^[51] He added that cases of rape are not widespread but that there are exceptions and that these are exceptional times. They are more prone to happen in IDP camps, he argued, noting cases of rape and harassment brought forward when he worked as a security officer in IDP camps for Somali refugees in Abyan.^[52]

Although muhammashat are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, especially when their men are away working or fighting,^[53] the justice system is not serving them adequately. Nabilah al-Jaboubi, a lawyer working with the Yemeni Women's Union in Taiz,^[54] said that “the security authorities and prosecutor's office are responsive, but we get to a point where the case is delayed. There have not been any rulings on the cases referred to them.”^[55] She also believes that there is a discrepancy in how the cases of muhammashat and women from other communities are dealt with, even if this is not the view of the security and judicial authorities.^[56] Citing the example of a young girl who was raped by fighters from one of the dominant armed groups in Taiz, she said the case did not involve any court sessions.

^[49] Interview with Haytham Mohammed Saif, the uncle of victim, February 10, 2022.

^[50] Interview with a prosecutor working in Abyan, March 10, 2022.

^[51] Interview with a former member of staff of prosecutor's office in Abyan, March 16, 2022.

^[52] Ibid.

^[53] Marta Colburn, Mohammed al-Harbi, and Sumaya Saleem, “Bringing Forth the Voices of the *Muhammasheen*,” June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Bringing_Forth_the_Voices_of_Muhammasheen_en.pdf

^[54] Interview with Nabilah al-Jaboubi, a lawyer working with the Yemeni Women's Union in Taiz, April 28, 2022.

^[55] Ibid.

^[56] Ibid.

Activists claim that since 2015, the number of violations against muhammashat has increased, which can be detected in cases of rape, including instances of gang rape of girls in the community. Families from the *muhammasheen* community are typically coerced into giving up their demand for justice by the threat of force, as happened in the case of a girl from the community by the name of Rasayel, a widely reported case^[57] that inspired local activists to launch a public campaign. Rasayel was a minor when a group of youths from an influential tribe in Taiz raped her. Her family was threatened with death if they asked for justice against the perpetrators. Her relatives were subsequently shot at, and her female relatives were attacked by the rapists' families. The security authorities subsequently released her assailants and arrested one of the girl's relatives instead, forcing them to give up on the case.^[58]

Members of the *muhammasheen* community believe that society discriminates against them because of the ingrained bias embedded in Yemen's security and judicial authorities. The lawyer Al-Jaboubi said, "The case of Rasayel^[59] continues to wither in the court system,"^[60] even though she was raped years ago." Four court sessions were held at which witnesses gave their statements, even though after two or three sessions, a ruling should have been made, according to Al-Jaboubi, who cited parallels with another rape case of a young girl from the *muhammasheen* community. "We need to operationalize the inspection and control department in the security directorate in the governorate because officers in the security directorate commit violations," continued Al-Jaboubi. It is noteworthy, she added, that just a week after young girls from the *muhammasheen* community had attended awareness-raising sessions on harassment and rape, including the importance of reporting such abuse to the security authorities, there were instances of girls being harassed by officers in the security directorate. Al-Jaboubi explained that one of the girls who had attended the awareness-raising session was harassed on a bus and tried to complain about it when the bus got to a checkpoint. The soldiers manning the checkpoint took the man from the bus and brought him to a police station. There, some officers extorted money from him, allowing him to avoid incarceration. Another incident recounted by Al-Jaboubi involved a girl who went to file a report at the security directorate because a man had harassed her, but the security director himself harassed her in his office."^[61]

An employee at a local rights organization highlighted how legal protection is currently unavailable to muhammashat, and for women more broadly, given the divisions in the country and armed groups taking control of territory , in addition to political factors that have restricted human rights and protection. “We work,

^[57] Ismail Aghbari, "About the Sexual Exploitation of Black And Marginalized Women in Yemen [AR]," Vice, September 22, 2023, www.vice.com/ar/article/عن-استغلال-السوداوات-والمهمشات-جنسي/

[58] "In support of the injustice of the child 'Rasayel,' the Union of the Marginalized calls on the people of Taiz to demonstrate next Tuesday [AR]," Taiz Today, January 4, 2021, <https://taiztoday.net/2021/01/24/اتحاد-المهمشين-دعاهم-للمظاهرات-التيمة-بمساعدة-الطفل-راسايل/>

[59] "Painful details of the rape of a marginalized girl in Taiz... And the prosecution releases the offender illegally! [AR]," Aden al-Gh ad, May 14, 2020, <https://www.adengad.net/news/463699>

[60] Interview with Nabilah al-Jaboubi, a lawyer working with the Yemeni Women's Union in Taiz, April 28, 2022.

[61] Ibid.

however, as much as we can to provide protection,"^[62] said the interviewee, who preferred to remain anonymous. "Security and legal protection are also closely linked to the tribes, and the authorities are not free from tribal structures [...] the war has helped instill tribal culture, in its negative aspects and structural discrimination between social classes, further weakening security and judicial authorities. This has led to serious consequences for muhammashat, depriving them of justice, whether for the physical violations or the false reports of theft made against them."^[63]

A decade of war and upheaval in Yemen has disrupted the upholding of social norms that used to provide a degree of protection for marginalized groups such as the *muhammasheen*, a situation exacerbated by the collapse of justice and law enforcement in Yemen due to war. With these protective structures in serious disrepair, muhammashat, as both women and members of a marginalized group, are some of the most vulnerable victims of Yemen's war, requiring concerted efforts from both local and international organizations to address their need and draw attention to their plight.

^[62] Interview with an employee at a local human rights organization, February 9, 2022

^[63] Ibid.

5. Recommendations

These recommendations result from extensive discussions with members of the *muhammasheen* community, social figures, security officers, and judicial figures in various governorates. The recommendations are directed to the international community, the Office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, UN agencies working with vulnerable communities such as UNICEF and the United Nations Development Programme, the National Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Violations to Human Rights, the Government of Yemen, and local civil society organizations.

To the Office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen:

- Exert pressure on the parties to the conflict to include the community in decision-making and the peace process.

To the National Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights:

- Monitor and document the challenges faced by marginalized groups. Focus on improved data collection on cases of sexual abuse of muhammashat and support research initiatives that identify best practices and effective interventions for supporting victims.
- Support the voices of *muhammasheen* youth, who are striving to achieve change in their societies, along with those documenting the impact of the conflict on the *muhammasheen* and reporting human rights violations committed against minorities in Yemen.

To UN Agencies Working with Vulnerable Communities:

- Build the capacity of activists, researchers, and journalists from the *muhammasheen* community and support local and international organizations working to empower minorities.
- Publicize the plight of the *muhammasheen* and the need to provide them legal protection, and exert pressure on decision-makers to protect minority groups in Yemen who are at greater risk of physical harassment and abuse.

To the Government of Yemen:

- Activate legislation that criminalizes racism against the *muhammasheen* community and upholds the values promoted in Yemen's constitution, which treats all segments of Yemeni society as equal and rejects the preference of one group over another.
- Maintain impartiality in Yemeni courts when dealing with cases involving *muhammasheen*.
- Enforce legal protection and security for the *muhammasheen* and adhere to constitutional principles that promote equal citizenship beyond race, color, and belief.

To Local Civil Society Organizations:

- Involve local communities in programs designed to bolster social cohesion , emphasizing peaceful coexistence to improve the perception of members of the *muhammasheen* community and laying the groundwork for community reconciliation.
- Engage and involve members of the *muhammasheen* community and work towards their just integration into society. Empower them socially, economically, and politically to secure the rights accorded to them by Yemeni laws and the constitution. Pay special attention to empowering young women and girls in the *muhammasheen* community to enhance their protection from the risks of abuse.
- Offer culturally sensitive training for relevant directorates and law enforcement providers, raising awareness on the subject of sexual and gender-based violence, recognizing signs of abuse among victims, and responding appropriately. In parallel, provide safe and confidential support services for victims of abuse where they can receive counseling, medical care, and legal assistance.
- Advocate for reform within the security and judicial authorities and push these agencies to be restructured to serve society justly and without discrimination.

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