



# RECLAIMING INCLUSIVE PEACE: SCALING THE POETICS OF CONFLICT

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COVER PHOTO: Artist Sabrine Amin al-Watiri, whose work often incorporates her perceptions of the war's impact on her community, paints in her home studio in Jabal Sabir, Taiz, on October 15, 2021, // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha.



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.

“

They said Ghazal and her mother are daughters  
of a fifth There is no fifth, O' servants of God, nor  
even a sixth... Even, even, O' Servants of God,  
evenhanded No one is born free, and another born  
a handmaid ”

— *Ghazal al-Magdashiyya*<sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] In saying a “fifth”, Yemeni poet Ghazal al-Magdashiyya, born in the mid-19th century, is referring to the “Bani Khums”, a social group of the lowest status in northern Yemen. Al-Magdashiyya’s poetry spoke against social injustice. W. Flagg Miller, “Public Words and Body Politics: Reflections on the Strategies of Women Poets in Rural Yemen,” *Journal of Women’s History*, Indiana University Press, Vol. 14, No. 1, DOI: [10.1353/jowh.2002.0024](https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2002.0024) Spring 2002, pp. 110-111.

## INTRODUCTION

In conflict zones, peacebuilding processes are often driven by the binary framing of victim and perpetrator. Peacebuilding within such a narrative is mainly about securing truces like those being strung together in Yemen today,<sup>[2]</sup> ending an ongoing militarized war or signing a peace agreement. In the context of Yemen, there is also a tendency by the international community to localize and reduce the conflict,<sup>[3]</sup> emphasizing it solely as a civil war<sup>[4]</sup> while disregarding the roles of many countries involved that benefit directly or indirectly from the continuation of war; both local and international players tend to center the conflict around armed struggles.<sup>[5]</sup> Such tendencies not only dismiss the historical and racial aspects of the conflict but also the other sorts of conflicts, wars and struggles faced by people in everyday life in Yemen and the diaspora; they also neglect the challenges faced by women, marginalized groups, migrants and displaced people.

Even when focusing on armed conflict, framing can be narrow or selective. For example, Yemenis' historical struggles such as those against colonialism and the imamate are often ignored. Similarly, the losses of life and struggles of those left behind by US drone strikes on Yemeni communities in the persistent “war on terror” and the modern vested interests of some parties in perpetuating war in Yemen tend to be disregarded along with related epistemic violence engendered in the form of exploitive financial, political and social systems.<sup>[6]</sup> War and peace, in other words, are usually understood from the international relations perspective, not through the lived experiences of people whose stories and histories are often neglected from the moment war is declared or peace is sought.

Peacebuilding events that focus on conflict and peace in their reductive forms make meaningful discussions on actually creating a peaceful and just society — or those on elements of peacebuilding such as transitional justice — a real challenge.

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[2] Hans Grundberg, “Press Statement by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg on a two-month renewal of the UN-Mediated Truce,” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, August 2, 2022, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/press-statement-un-special-envoy-yemen-hans-grundberg-two-month-renewal-un-mediated-truce>

[3] See, for example, remarks by US Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking: “The Conflict in Yemen – Day One – Opening Session,” from the conference The Conflict in Yemen: Current Situation and Future Prospects, Arab Center, Washington DC, February 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLOgD7T6Tjc&t=540s>

[4] “No end to Yemen civil war on the horizon, senior UN official briefs Security Council,” UN News, August 23, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1098272>

[5] Ayman Nabil, “A Statement on Thinking about Peace in Yemen,” AlMadaniya, February 15, 2021, <https://almaidaniyamag.com/2021/02/15/peace-in-yemen/> Ayman Nabil, “A Statement on Thinking about Peace in Yemen,” AlMadaniya, February 15, 2021, <https://almaidaniyamag.com/2021/02/15/peace-in-yemen/>

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most influential postcolonial scholars, introduced the term “epistemic violence” in her 1988 article, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” to describe the intellectual undermining and erasure of non-Western knowledge. See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds: Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271-313.

They also can contribute to a sense that peace has been appropriated,<sup>[7]</sup> and that rather than being part of lived realities, peacebuilding is merely an industry that thrives on people's miseries and acts against urgent needs and desires. Women, who historically have been excluded from negotiation tables, have long participated in alternative, non-linear forms of peacebuilding, often finding effective informal ways to maneuver around inequalities in order to address societal needs. While processes and mechanisms of inclusion in formal peace negotiations hold some importance, meaningful inclusion — hoped to bring about a truly just peace — does not necessarily follow from being granted a seat at a table where the game is played by the same old set of rules. What is missing in the dominant frames are the intersectional layers of lived experiences — how gender, race, class, nationality, religion and other social and global structures affect inclusive peacebuilding.<sup>[8]</sup> Navigating those dimensions and breaking silences existing within them so that the struggle of lived experiences is acknowledged helps sustain peace.

This policy brief, stemming from a December 2021 online workshop on meaningful inclusion in peacemaking processes, maintains it is crucial to build capacities to “hold space,” to allow people (in this case women) who otherwise are excluded or selectively and forcefully included, to be seen and heard without judgment.<sup>[9]</sup> It builds on the notion of “staying with the trouble” by Donna Haraway, a leading scholar in feminist theory.<sup>[10]</sup> It also keeps at the forefront Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, which holds that dominant ideology blocks authentic knowledge of marginalized people and that those in power must unlearn privileges alongside the oppressed in order to understand their needs and act accordingly.<sup>[11]</sup>

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[7] See, for example, Hadil al-Mowafak, “Meaningful Civil Society Engagement can Restore Trust in the Peace Process,” Yemen Policy Center, January 2022, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/meaningful-civil-society-engagement-can-restore-trust-in-the-peace-process/> See, for example, Hadil al-Mowafak, “Meaningful Civil Society Engagement can Restore Trust in the Peace Process,” Yemen Policy Center, January 2022, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/meaningful-civil-society-engagement-can-restore-trust-in-the-peace-process/>

[8] Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Columbia Law School professor, coined the term “intersectionality” in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Issue 1, Article 8, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>. Intersectionality examines overlapping systems of oppression, taking into consideration aspects of political and social identity including gender, class, race, etc.

[9] To better understand practical applications of the idea of holding space, see the work of Aminata Cairo, a psychologist and anthropologist who approaches inclusion as the collective creation of a new story to create an environment of equality and validation: Aminata Cairo, *Holding Space: A Storytelling Approach to Trampling Diversity and Inclusion*, (Amsterdam: Aminata Cairo Consultancy, 2021).

[10] To stay with the trouble involves an individual learning and unlearning how to address what matters to her or himself. Beyond storytelling or speaking, it is about listening with an intent to create understanding of differing points of view and how they can coexist without necessarily agreeing or conflicting. Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016). Haraway argues that knowledge can be more objective when those who generate it understand their position rather than claiming a neutral perspective: Haraway, Donna, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, Autumn 1988; Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 575-599.

[11] Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

During the workshop, nurturing participants' capacities through artistic practices was intended to assist the women present in identifying what is at stake for them, rather than merely reproducing power inequalities such as those found within traditional formal peacemaking processes or in funding regimes for international assistance.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provided inspiration to build capacities for holding space through storytelling and poetry. Freire, the philosopher and educator whose work on power imbalances in political and social structures is foundational in the field of critical pedagogy, challenged Eurocentric approaches and argued that people can regain their human rights by fighting back through their own tools.<sup>[12]</sup> Along with reinforcing epistemic violence, Eurocentric approaches in peacebuilding tend to consider human or women's rights narrowly and assume all women aspire to the sorts of formal leadership roles existing within established mechanisms.

Exploring what war, peace or inclusion mean to Yemenis, or specifically to Yemeni women, requires allowing Yemeni women to build a language from lived experiences — to tell our stories and produce our knowledge, without regard to criticisms that lived stories lack objectivity. To speak with no fear requires poetics to produce actions that transform lived fears so that an internal, inclusive peace, something that is often ignored in formal peacebuilding agendas, can be achieved.

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[12] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, 3rd Edition, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).



## METHODOLOGY

In view of the theoretical framework described above, sessions in the December 2-4, 2021, online Peace and Poetry Workshop employed creative and artistic practices with 27 Yemeni women, ages 18-64 living in and outside Yemen, who were active in the public, private and academic sectors. Some of the women were working within formal peacebuilding initiatives and organizations, in areas including documentation, education and mediation. All would be considered experts in their respective fields, but their political and social affiliations varied widely. Some were nominated by the author, who curated the workshop, based on familiarity with their work and activism; some were nominated by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies based on prior collaboration, and others were nominated by various researchers working within civil society organizations. Because the research approach aimed to interrogate dominant narratives in the context of peacebuilding and highlight daily lived experiences, workshop sessions were designed around concepts of safety and joy as well as fear.

Two methods of analyzing the multiple layers of the artistic work done in the sessions were used, one aimed at activating silences and the other archival:

- thinking through/discussing with the women the stories and poetry that they shared during the workshop as a deconstructive practice to illustrate what matters and what is at stake; and
- recording the sessions and taking notes based on observations of the dynamics among the women to analyze what happened when they were given the tools to hold space.



## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### Pluralities of Female Subjecthood and Leadership in a Situation of Oppression

One workshop activity tapped the story of Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, and how she used storytelling to negotiate her life.<sup>[13]</sup> Despite conflicting feminist analyses of the story, it was used to start a conversation with the participants by asking them to imagine themselves in the role of Scheherazade. The participants' responses showed the plural visions of female subjecthood and leadership, which are elaborated on below.

One stream of responses viewed Scheherazade's actions as a feminist act: She represented a leader who protected herself and other women through storytelling. "She saved a thousand women," as one said.<sup>[14]</sup> To these women, the struggle against oppression and power inequality should not only be face-to-face but also through other means; in this case, through stories. Scheherazade represented the power of women to use their difference from men as a way to speak back rather than to attempt to ignore the difference, alluding to the idea that if men are physically strong, then women are astute and resourceful. These women perceived Scheherazade's struggle in a relational and collective way.

Another stream of response was critical of Scheherazade's actions. These women spoke of being unable to wait so long — more than 2 ½ years — to fight back. "Why would I narrate 1,000 stories?!" one woman said. Another, in characterizing her way of responding to oppression, said, "I am an attacker, and it hurts me in a bad way." Unlike the previous stream of responses, these women focused much more on the here and now of violence and how it is experienced and resisted individually.

Another stream pointed to the power position of the unknown narrator of the story, noting it clearly was a man. The often male-centric imaginations of female struggles and limited options given to the female protagonist were associated with this male narration of female resistance stories.

The above exercise reflects the plural positions and responses to what matters and how resistance, subjecthood and leadership are envisioned in a situation of oppression. However, when brought to questions of peacebuilding and inclusion of women and female leadership in peacebuilding processes, it raises several questions:

[13] In *One Thousand and One Nights*, compiled during the Islamic Golden Age, King Shahryar kills his unfaithful wife and then, in an act of revenge, decides to marry a virgin each day and kill her the next. Scheherazade, the female protagonist, uses storytelling to negotiate her life by telling King Shahryar a story every night that leaves him wanting to hear more. After 1,000 tales, Scheherazade tells the king she has no more stories, but by then he has fallen in love with her and she keeps her life.

[14] Participant, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana'a Center, December 3, 2021.



- Who is scripting the story of including women in peacebuilding processes?
- To what extent are daily struggles seen as part of female leadership in peacebuilding processes?
- Is there space for gender differences in visions for ending violence?

At the same time, it is important to consider the responses themselves as situated in the power asymmetries of the locations and positions from which the participants were speaking. For instance, those who were speaking from the diaspora associated mostly with the second stream of response, unable to contemplate themselves employing Scheherazade’s patient and self-sacrificing method. A majority of the women living inside Yemen, however, associated with the first stream of response.

Finally, this activity exhibited how participants managed to listen to each other without silencing those who had not yet spoken. They had agreed to be in the same space despite their differences and political affiliations, and they self-monitored their responses such that the space was shared equally. This is the sort of “unlearning privilege”, as Spivak terms it, that began to be seen during the workshop; it points to the urgency of providing spaces where there is no bigger agenda than listening to each other, with all of the participants’ differences and power asymmetries shaping conversations.

## Poetic Associations of War/Fear and Peace/Security–Safety

Poetry allows us to feel and think through our emotions; it brings lived experiences closer and invites us to respond. It allows us to imagine and to think beyond the oppositional nature of words. Audre Lorde, the late Black feminist poet and English professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, described poetry as essential to women and their experiences:

“For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.”<sup>[15]</sup>

On the third day of the workshop, participants were asked to make free associations to the words “war” and “fear”. The main language of war and fear was filled with associations and imaginings from everyday life.

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[15] Audre Lorde, and Roxane Gay, *The selected works of Audre Lorde*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), p. 24.

This exercise demonstrated that the dominant imaginaries shared by the participants — death, famine, conflict, displacement — coexist with the mundane, which included pain, waiting, illness.

With free associations to the words “peace” and “security/safety”, participants expressed words that belong to the dominant geopolitical language of peacemaking: patriotism, homeland, development, infrastructure. Nevertheless, these words were used in conjunction with daily emotions and needs like beauty, joy, adventure, well-being, reunion, dignity, stability, hope, ambition, growth, dream and knowledge.

The participants were then asked to connect the two associations (war-fear; peace-security/safety) to construct their poems and then read them to each other. “We will wait for a life that shall return,” one woman wrote, “because a Yemeni is patriotic in spirit!” And another wrote of being “Yemeni with a free spirit. I am neither clothed in despair nor let sorrows kill me.” A third: “I’ve always chosen love over hate / And sung to the pains of the bereaved, hymns / And I painted pictures of child victims / Caught in a game of paintball and freedom’s noose.”<sup>[16]</sup> The exercise served as a healing space, where women could collaborate and not compete. There were no debates on issues or attempts to seek out solutions, but rather a focus on hearing each other out and understanding others’ perspectives.

## A Lack of Safe Spaces and Fear of Exclusion

Many participants in the workshop, even the highly educated or those leading prominent organizations, acknowledged that in many forums with sessions on peace and women’s inclusion, they don’t always say what they want to say. Instead, they say what they perceive is expected of them. Reasons they cited for this included fears of being excluded, mocked or being seen as naïve. “They would laugh at me or exclude me from future events if I said what I really want,” one youth activist said.<sup>[17]</sup> Peace and security, she said, meant to her that she could wake up every morning able to have a calm moment with a cup of coffee without feeling she needed to fight for basic rights.<sup>[18]</sup> Another participant articulated it as the capacity to live her life the way she wants with no fear of judgment from society.<sup>[19]</sup> To other women, peace and security equated strongly with dignity, equal opportunities, movement within Yemen or travel abroad as well as, as one woman said, simply “to live, me and you, to live with each other, to not be afraid of the moment, of tomorrow or of each other.”<sup>[20]</sup>

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[16] Participants work, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana’a Center, December 4, 2021.

[17] Youth activist, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana’a Center, December 3, 2021.

[18] Participant, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana’a Center, December 3, 2021.

[19] Participant, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana’a Center, December 3, 2021.

[20] Perspectives voiced by various participants living in and outside Yemen, Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana’a Center, December 3, 2021.

Another critical point some women acknowledged during the session was that they build their peacebuilding projects based on the sponsor's agenda and not on their communities' essential needs. This is done to secure funding. Kolar Aparna, a postdoctoral researcher, noted that funding relationships are also important to understand when weighing the views and recommendations of those participating in peacemaking processes.<sup>[21]</sup> Sawsan al-Refai, a Yemeni researcher and public policy strategist, also cautioned participants that the international community and organizations fail to distinguish among conflict situations. Instead, she said, they often force their agendas for stabilizing the inequality gap in Yemen based on previous studies of communities elsewhere, such as in Afghanistan, Rwanda or Iraq, when people in Yemen have a unique reality.<sup>[22]</sup>

Others, like the youth activist above, pointed to how men shame women who work in peace or whose conceptions of peace have evolved away from dominant narratives. A woman from Sana'a, for example, spoke of how advocating for an end to war in northern Yemen is stigmatized as aligning with the Saudi-led military coalition. These women are exposed to double violence. On the local level, they are shamed for speaking up for their rights and needs, and at the international level, they are mocked or excluded for not following the dominant narratives of peacebuilding and inclusion agendas. When this happens, intentionally or unintentionally, agendas for peace end up perpetrating violence.

### Unlearning Privileges: When a Feminist Agenda Isn't Necessarily a Women's Agenda

Some participants and speakers argued that feminist agendas, whether of foreign organizations active in Yemen or of Yemeni feminists, often focus on either the dominant narrative of ending the war or on the white, Western feminist narrative<sup>[23]</sup> of equal opportunities.

Bilqees al-Lahbi, a workshop speaker, Yemeni activist and feminist political researcher with the Sana'a Center, said many women in her social circles are not so concerned at this point about ending the war, let alone about equal opportunities. "They care about having a fixed income source that helps them feed their families," Al-Lahbi said.<sup>[24]</sup>

[21] Aparna, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki's Department of Cultures, spoke about destabilizing grand narratives during the Peace and Poetry Workshop, December 2, 2021.

[22] Al-Refai, a public policy expert in gender equality and inclusiveness, spoke about human security as a framework for developing context-specific solutions to ensure people's safety and livelihoods, at the Peace and Poetry Workshop, Sana'a Center, December 3, 2021.

[23] In *Feminism for the 99 Manifesto*, the authors argue that feminism today focuses on a minor group of women and their requirements toward securing powerful positions equal to those of the men who dominate the world. They ask: "Will we continue to pursue 'equal opportunity domination' while the planet burns? Or will we reimagine gender justice in an anticapitalistic form — one that leads beyond the present crisis to a new society?" Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser. *Feminism for the 99 percent: A Manifesto*. (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 4-5.

[24] Al-Lahbi, in remarks to the author during the workshops, December 2, 2021; Al-Lahbi addressed workshop participants on December 2, 2021, on dominant narratives of war and peace in Yemen and how to challenge them.

Such views serve to highlight the multiple layers of violence that those women have been exposed to, and how such exposure has reduced their needs and desires to the most basic: for example, surviving man-made starvation<sup>[25]</sup> or finding physical safety in their own homes and communities. One participant, a human rights activist, noted more women and girls have been subjected to domestic violence and sex trafficking in recent years.<sup>[26]</sup> Addressing economic factors driving these issues would, for these women, bring a significant measure of peace and security regardless of whether combat actually ceased.

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[25] "Yemen Pushed Towards Man-Made Famine," Oxfam, March 23, 2017 <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/yemen-pushed-towards-man-made-famine-620233/> "Yemen Pushed Towards Man-Made Famine," Oxfam, March 23, 2017 <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/yemen-pushed-towards-man-made-famine-620233/>

[26] Human rights activist, Peace and Poetry Workshop, online, Sana'a Center, December 2, 2021.



## CONCLUSION

### Rethinking Power Structures and Rewriting the Story

Radically rethinking power structures regarding race, gender and class when talking about women's inclusion and representation begins to address questions of who represents Yemeni women, and which women should be included in formal negotiations. Doing so ensures the focus is on achieving an inclusive peace rooted in equity for all people. However, it requires acknowledging that ideas about gender, racial or class differences are not based on metaphysical truths but have been influenced by specific historical processes and social practices.

Several workshop participants who were critical of a general lack of networking among groups of women noted a tendency for women to compete rather than to collaborate within the civil society and political spheres where many of them operate. On the contrary, they spoke of the Peace and Poetry Workshop as a healing space, and they shared it equally despite differences. In such spaces where power dynamics are equal, new stories of inclusion and validation can be created.

Scaling the poetics of conflict to rethink inclusion and peace involves catalyzing artistic practices and local knowledge. In this way, it becomes possible to think radically about what it means to have human rights and to document everyday struggles of people who are usually excluded from decisions about war and peace. Rather than resolving opposing views or dividing people into victims and enemies, a new story can evolve that ensures common understanding, values differences and lives in an environment of equity, validation and justice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

### **To the Yemeni civil society community:**

- Incorporate artistic practices in advocacy work, including in workshops, training seminars and other micropolitical interventions. These should be designed specifically as healing spaces where differing perspectives and departures from dominant narratives can be voiced without fear and heard without judgment.
- Improve networking opportunities so that women in Yemen and the diaspora can share experiences and support each other, whether in formal or informal peacemaking settings or in their daily lives and activities.
- Be aware of how dominant narratives can obscure or ignore the needs of people CSOs seek to assist and gear programs toward responding to needs derived from people's lived experiences.

### **To international organizations involved in humanitarian, political and development efforts in Yemen:**

- Seek out training, especially for those involved in strategic planning and programs, that is geared toward unlearning privileges and understanding the harm and disruption to local-level activities brought about by unequal epistemic relationships.
- Incorporate an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals into peacemaking efforts, rather than relying on dominant narratives, to ensure the post-war environment brings meaningful improvement to the lives of the country's diverse citizenry.

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