

The Lasting Legacy of Raufah Hassan (1958-2011)



The Lasting Legacy of Raufah Hassan (1958-2011)

By: Lara Uhlenhaut

April 27, 2025

Cover photo: Raufah Hassan © Sana'a Center.



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.

“It is my opinion that democracy cannot be invented by a country nor imposed by a government. However, it grows within a house. A man and a woman who do not practice democracy between themselves cannot form a democratic society.”^[1]

—Raufah Hassan

April 27 marks the anniversary of the death of Raufah Hassan, who passed away in Cairo in 2011 at the young age of 53. Deeply loved and revered by generations of Yemenis, Raufah Hassan was a pioneer in Yemeni women's rights and a respected journalist, academic, writer, and intellectual. To countless admirers, however, she represented much more than these titles convey; she was seen as someone who “carried the cultural truth of Yemen” and who was, in essence, a sociologist, “not just of women but of Yemeni society as a whole.”^[2]

In 2007, at the beachside hotel of *Khaleej al-Fil* (Elephant Bay) in Aden, I had the privilege of meeting Raufah Hassan. The resort had long been a favorite among Yemenis and foreigners due to the unique rock formation of the bay, resembling an elephant trunk, and the opportunity to sit by its picturesque cove with the Adeni sound of black crows in the background. It was a brief encounter—a chatty table of Yemeni and foreign women, most of whom worked in the field of women's rights and who, like her, were on a brief visit to Aden from Sana'a.

Raufah's reputation preceded her. Among the international community, too, she was an icon. Her signature headscarf, wrapped on top like a male *mshadda*^[3] and flowing like a *latham*^[4] at the bottom, spoke of individuality and of someone who swam against the current. She was linked to a story often recounted in many women's circles and gatherings — a story that happened years earlier but served as a cautionary tale for development workers addressing gender issues in Yemen. In 1999, she was at the center of one of the country's most aggressive incitement campaigns led against a woman, in which 129 mosques across Yemen mobilized in unison against her, falsely accusing her of introducing contentions and blasphemous concepts regarding gender. With her renowned slender build, Raufah faced the crushing weight of Yemen's conservative establishment, leading her to leave the country temporarily. It was a story that exemplified remarkable defiance but ultimately represented a small part of a more significant legacy spun in an all too brief life.

[1] On the day of her death, Aden Al-Ghad published an extensive interview carried out by the prominent Arabic-language new platform Elaph with Raufah Hassan. See Farouq Jweida, “Raufah Hassan Dies,” Aden Al-Ghad [AR], April 27, 2011, <https://www.adngad.net/>

[2] Interview with Ahmed Garhash, member of the Free Officers Organization during the September 26, 1962 revolution, and public figure who held various civil and military positions, November 14, 2024.

[3] Mshadda is a traditional headgear worn by Yemeni men typically tied around the head, and also commonly worn in others parts of the Arab world.

[4] Letham, a garment that is worn by women across different regions of Yemen and that covers the neck and face

Beginnings of a Legacy

Amat al-Raouf Hussain al-Sharki (her real name) was born and raised in old Sana'a in the *Al-Tabri* neighborhood^[5] and came from a well-known jurist (*qadi*) family. At the start of the 1970s, when television sets had not yet entered Yemeni households, and radio was the primary medium used, Raufah, at just 12 years old, began working in a children's program.^[6] Strong-willed and ambitious, upon finishing school, she aspired to do more in radio. She wanted to become an announcer, but social pressures on women were difficult to overcome. Working in radio as a female, she said in an interview, was considered as degrading as "being a dancer, or worse," from the point of view of a conservative family.^[7] The solution came from the Minister of Media at the time, Abdullah Hamran,^[8] who suggested she adopt the pseudonym 'Raufah Hassan.' That way, the audience would not recognize her family name, helping her avoid any associated shame. The name Raufah Hassan stuck.

In her formative years, Raufah went on to become a Yemeni household name, working in television and radio and producing programs such as *Ana, Huwa wa Anta* (I, Him and You), and *Suwar Min Biladi* (Pictures from My Country).^[9] Her passion for radio and television appearances would continue intermittently, even as she dedicated herself to other pursuits. Her educational endeavors took her back and forth between Yemen and abroad, pursuing journalistic studies in Egypt, the United States, and later, France, where she completed a PhD in Sociology at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris. Raufah was fluent in Arabic, English, and French.^[10]

It was through journalism, however, that she first began leaving an indelible mark on Yemeni society. In the 1980s, upon her return from studies in Egypt, she became the first woman employed by one of Yemen's largest newspapers, *Al-Thawra*, where she headed the Investigative Department. Until today, generations of Yemeni journalists owe their careers to Raufah Hassan. In 1991, she founded the first-ever Media Department at the University of Sana'a, laying down the roots for the establishment of a Media Faculty in 2006. Among her students, she left a mark so profound that for years, anyone associated with the Media Department would be affectionately called "Raufah's kids."^[11] Her journalistic legacy, however, also lives on through her writings, which she pursued prolifically throughout her life, the titles of which showcased not only her trademark witticism and humor *Yahebbni, Wa Le Yahebbni* (He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not)^[12] but an unmistakable journalistic flair. Her final article, titled *Taasa wa Hozn* (Misery and Sadness), was published in *al-Watan* on April 28, 2011, during Yemen's Arab Spring protests, written just 12 days before her death.^[13]

[5] "Raufah Hassan: A Name in the Dictionary of the Revolution [AR]," EOHM, July 6, 2020, <https://eohm.org/رؤوفه-حسن-اسم-في-قاموس-الثورة>

[6] Yemen Used to Be, "Raufah Hassan," March 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSXdXF5H7zk>

[7] Farouq Jweida, "Raufah Hassan Dies [AR]," Aden Al-Ghad, April 27, 2011, <https://www.adngad.net/>

[8] "A Story of a Woman Unlike All Others. Raufah Who Did Well in Everything [AR]," Al-Harf 28, April 27, 2020, <http://alharf28.com/p-38989>

[9] Ibid.

[10] Interview with Redha Qarhash, Former Regional Coordination officer at the International Trade Union Confederation and personal friend of Raufah Hassan, November 14, 2024.

[11] "A Story of a Woman Unlike All Others. Raufah Who Did Well in Everything [AR]," Al-Harf 28, April 27, 2020, <http://alharf28.com/p-38989>

[12] In an article published on January 15, 2011, titled "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not," she criticized the lack of political empowerment for women and their exclusion from parliament. She argued that the electoral quotas should include an additional 44 seats for women. Raufah Hassan, "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not [AR]," Al-Motamar, January 15, 2011, <https://www.almotamar.net/pda/87843.htm>

[13] "A Story of a Woman Unlike all Others. Raufah Who Did Well in Everything [AR]," Al-Harf 28, April 27, 2020, <http://alharf28.com/p-38989>

A Force for Women's Rights and Social Change

At the heart of her legacy, however, Raufah Hassan will always be remembered for her lifelong dedication to women's rights and desire to drive social change. Her efforts resulted in achievements for women arguably unparalleled in the country, especially in the north, where women had not been afforded the progressive policies introduced in the south during the era of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). "Northern women had suffered so much to participate in public life and had to pay so dearly through personal sacrifice to reach that level. In the south, women were more emancipated; they formed part of unions, but the struggle for women in the north was far worse," said a former student at Sana'a University and a personal friend of Raufah.^[14]

Throughout her lifetime, Raufah was a member and founder of countless women's associations, advocating widely for the participation of Yemeni women in political life. She was vocal about their lack of representation in parliament, running as an independent candidate in the Yemen Arab Republic's 1988 parliamentary elections,^[15] and set up initiatives to register women to vote.^[16] A prominent figurehead for Yemeni women, she represented them in some of the most historical regional and global conferences held on women's rights, from Libya, Cairo, and Morocco to Beijing,^[17] providing her with a deep understanding of the international landscape regarding women's rights and earning her respect and admiration both at home and abroad. She had a wide network, an astute knowledge of society, and a diplomatic knack for getting what she wanted.^[18] Her sharp critique of the suppression of women went beyond criticism of her own society's patriarchal frameworks, extending to critiques of Arab constitutions^[19] and the complacency of global institutions, including the UN, whose development legacy she once called "development with half a leg," noting its failure to adequately include women.

[14] Interview with Redha Qarhash, former Regional Coordination officer at the International Trade Union Confederation and a personal friend of Raufah Hassan, November 14, 2024.

[15] Raufah Hassan ran for a parliament seat in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1988, the last parliamentary elections held in the YAR before unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Political parties were banned at the time, but candidates could run independently. Her candidacy, along with a handful of other women, marked a significant moment for women in Yemen's political history. Even though their candidacies were accepted, Islamist groups, led by Islah figure Abdelmajid al-Zindani objected to their participation. The pressure led to most women withdrawing. Raufah, along with pioneering engineer Faiza al-Mutawakkil held firm, although their names were ultimately removed on the day of election. Exchange with Bilqees al-Lahbi, Gender and Civil Society Advisor at the Sana'a Center, April 23, 2025.

[16] L.E. Picard, "In Remembrance: Dr. Raufa Hassan—Activist, Professor, Journalist," The Yemen Peace Project, April 26, 2011, <https://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/blog-x/uncategorized/in-remembrance-dr-raufa-hassan-activist-professor-journalist>

[17] Margot Badran, "Gender: Meanings, Uses, and Discourses in Post-Unification Yemen," The Yemen Times, June 19, 2000, <https://yementimes.com/gender-meanings-uses-and-discourses-in-post-unification-yemen-archives2000-25-culture-3/>

[18] Interview with Ahmed Garhash, member of the Free Officers Organization during the September 26, 1962 revolution and public figure who held various civil and military positions, November 14, 2024.

[19] Raufah Hassan, "Arab Constitutions Worked to Differentiate Between Men and Women," March 28, 2004, <https://www.almotamar.net/pda/8240.htm>

Always keen to break new ground, in 1993, she founded the first Women's Studies Department at the University of Sana'a, which three years later evolved into the Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center. The center offered innovative courses on gender theory and gender research methodologies, concepts that were new to the university and integral to the discipline of women's studies. Her efforts in this field, however, came at a heavy price.

In 1999, while leading the center, Raufah became the target of one of the most aggressive incitement campaigns directed at a Yemeni woman, in an era predating social media and the more prevalent cyberbullying of female leaders seen today. Just one week before the presidential elections that year, she co-organized an international conference called "Challenges for Women Studies in the 21st Century," with more than 56 countries participating and some of the world's leading thinkers on women's rights attending. Conservative segments, led by the Islamist Islah party, sought a scapegoat to divert from the internal political dynamics shadowing the elections at the time. They misconstrued topics discussed in the conference, resulting in the mobilization of a coordinated defamation campaign against her.^[20] As a result, 129 mosques condemned her in Friday sermons, publicly vilifying her from podiums across the country.^[21]

Cassettes condemning Raufah were widely sold at traffic junctions, mosques, and universities with defamatory titles such as "*Al Gender Yaghzu Al Yemen* (Gender Invades Yemen), *Al-Qerda Al-Muqaliida* (The Imitating Monkey), and *Mu'aammarat wa Mu'tamarat* (Conspiracies and Conferences)."^[22] The dramatic events caused her to leave the country abruptly. Interviews and articles written about her suggest that the incident was one of her darkest moments.^[23] She spent four years teaching in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Tunisia until she returned to Yemen in 2005 and founded the Cultural and Development Programs Foundation,^[24] which led various initiatives, from promoting women's political participation to tracing the national uniforms of Yemeni political figures across the ages.

[20] The alliance between President Saleh and the Islamist Islah party, critical for Saleh's victory in the 1994 civil war, was nearing its end. With a new presidential election approaching, Islah's leaders struggled to agree on a presidential candidate, due their ongoing political conflicts with Saleh. To maintain party unity, a compromise was reached, and the leadership decided to support Saleh's candidacy. This decision, however, did not sit well with Islah's party base and supporters. Therefore, a distraction was needed. See Elham Manea, "Raufah Hassan, An Appreciation (1958-2011)," The British-Yemeni Society, Aug 26, 2015, <https://britishyemenisociety.org.uk/hassan-raufa/>

[21] When asked why did she not respond to Islah's attack she said, "I did not answer them and I am not in favour of asking them even though president Ali Abdullah Saleh asked me to answer them through the media. But I told him "those people attacked me in 129 mosques across Yemen and they produced three tapes that they are selling in all traffic junctions and in front of mosques and universities [...] I cannot answer them doing a tape like theirs and I can't distribute it the way they did, and nor can I go to 129 mosques across the republic to be able to correct the information that they said about me from the podiums." Farouq Jweida, "Raufah Hassan Dies," Aden Al-Ghad, April 27, 2011, <https://www.adngad.net/>

[22] Ibid.

[23] Elham Manea, "Raufah Hassan, An Appreciation (1958-2011)," The British-Yemeni Society, Aug 26, 2015, <https://britishyemenisociety.org.uk/hassan-raufa/>

[24] Zaid al-Alaya'a, "Raufa Hassan, Precious Philanthropist Dies at 53," April 29, 2011, Afrah Nasser Blog, <https://afrahnasser.blogspot.com/2011/04/dr-raufa-hassan-is-one-in-million.html>

Beyond Feminism

“The state, the constitution, the law, citizenship, equality, rights, and so forth. Vocabulary that used to live in that thin body with faith and enthusiasm, believing that change is coming to build a modern and progressive Yemen, a Yemen that resembles no other than its own civilization and values ”

—Fatima Mutaher, Member of the Executive Council of the Syndicate of Journalists.^[25]

The 14th anniversary of Raufah Hassan's death falls at a particularly challenging time for women worldwide,^[26] more so for women in Yemen, whose infringements of rights have been widely covered by many organizations, including the Sana'a Center.^[27] Remembering Raufah Hassan today inspires much-needed foresight and courage at a time when discussions on women center around two key narratives: the egregious and tragic violations they continue to face and their continuous relegation to the sidelines. To this day, Raufah continues to be a role model—unquestionably for women in Yemen but also for women worldwide, whose lives she unknowingly touched. As such, it is easy to define Raufah Hassan's legacy as that of Yemen's foremost feminist icon.

Yet, confining her legacy to Western feminist tropes and celebrated stories of defiance would arguably overlook the legacy of someone who left an even more significant imprint on Yemen, one deeply rooted in a progressive vision of a fair and just society, and the pursuit of a homeland “that resembles no other than itself.” Her views on gender issues were ahead of their time, but they were, at the same time, deeply anchored in the unique lived experience of a woman breaking barriers in a distinct cultural context characterized by a social fabric layered with nuanced and demanding expectations on women. She was vocal about the fact that the struggle for equality in Yemen must involve both men and women. This viewpoint still challenges many outdated approaches that, to this day, confine discussions on gender dynamics solely to women, marginalizing them even further.

Describing how she tried to resist attempts by international donors to prescribe how gender should be studied in Yemen, she once said, “[W]e disagreed with the Western concept of feminism. Feminism used to mean a ghetto, in general, for women [...], but this was not our perception. We wanted men and women to study our society and to question the existing theories so we would be able to create a new theory. We cannot do that as women alone, nor can men do that alone; we should do that together. It is not a story about the female gender. We are talking about the story of female and male genders and our problems together because we are facing problems with each other.”^[28]

[25] “A Story of a Woman Unlike All Others. Raufah Who Did Well in Everything [AR],” Al-Harf 28, April 27, 2020, <http://alharf28.com/p-38989>

[26] Mahima Kapoor, “Women's Rights Under Attack Amid Democratic Erosion: UN, DW, March 6, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/womens-rights-under-attack-amid-democratic-erosion-un/a-71841821>

[27] Bilquis Al-Lahbi, Rim Mugahed & Lara Uhlenhaut, “A Year in Patriarchy: Key Setbacks in Yemeni Women's Rights in 2024,” Yemen Peace Forum, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 27, 2025, <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/key-setbacks-in-yemeni-womens-rights-in-2024/>

[28] Elham Manea, “Raufah Hassan, An Appreciation (1958-2011),” The British-Yemeni Society, August 26, 2015, <https://britishyemensociety.org.uk/hassan-raufa/>

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

This analysis was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.



WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG