

The Uphill Struggle for Yemeni Women in Academia



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By: Rim Mugahed

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Cover photo: Students gather in the courtyard of Taiz University's College of Education at the start of a new school day on January 10, 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.

April 27 marked the 13th anniversary of the death of Dr. Raufah Hassan, one of Yemen's most prominent academics, feminists, and activists. In 1993, she founded the first Women's Studies Unit at Sana'a University, which later became the Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center.^[1] A pioneering undertaking of its time, the research center gained notoriety among Yemenis because of the backlash received from religious conservatives. Due to the center's work, Hassan became the primary target in religiously motivated incitement campaigns, prompting her to leave Yemen for several years.^[2] Decades later, bitter questions remain: Has anything changed concerning the lived realities of female academics in Yemen? And what of the future of women's studies centers in the country?

Although Yemen has a rich intellectual history, modern-day university traditions remain nascent and not deeply rooted in society and culture. Sana'a University was established in 1970, while the University of Aden opened in 1975.^[3] Others, such as Abyan University, were established as late as 2018. Still, these universities have challenged the status quo, particularly related to women's empowerment and participation in decision-making. This reality has placed burdens on female academics, as women in Yemen generally face strict social conventions that limit their participation in public life, such as requiring them not to mingle with the opposite sex.

Had Yemen's political and economic situation been more stable in the decades that followed the opening of the first university, women might have better overcome these challenges, leading to more women entering public life. However, the era of totalitarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1994 civil war, and the spread of conservative religious ideology have hindered this trajectory. Specifically, under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, conservative religious parties were given free rein to shape educational curricula and set the general mood in the country. The current war and the resulting fragmentation of the country into regions governed by various de facto authorities has further compounded **issues women face**, including in the education sector.

A Gender Divide at Yemen's Universities

At Sana'a University, the largest university in Yemen, there is a stark discrepancy between the number of male and female academics, particularly in senior positions. According to research conducted in 2023 by the university's Center for Gender and Development Research and Studies,^[4] there were only 12 female professors compared to 211 male professors, 59 female associate professors compared to 326

[1] 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/>

[2] Fathi Bin Lazraq "Raufah Hassan Has Died [AR]," *Aden al-Ghad*, April 27, 2011, <https://www.adengad.net/news/1734>

[3] "General Education Profile," Yemen National Information Center, www.yemen-nic.info/sectors/education/#:-:text=يعد التعليم العالي الجامعي حديث,وكلية الناصر

[4] Abdul-Wahhab Abdul-Qader and Elham al-Reda, "Attitudes Towards Women as Managers and Leaders in Yemeni Universities," Case Study -Sana'a University, *Sana'a University Journal*, Vol 5, 2023, <https://journals.su.edu.ye/index.php/jhs/article/view/546/204>

male associate professors, and 126 female assistant professors compared to 521 male assistant professors. The 32-seat University Council has no women at all; other bodies such as the Academic Council, Graduate Council, Personnel Affairs Committee, and Student Affairs Council have only one female representative each.^[5] This trend is visible in other Yemeni universities. In Abyan, the university council has two women compared to 30 men, and no women college deans and director-generals.^[6] “The political instability in the country has led men to completely take over decision-making positions,” said Dr. Nada Shafik, General Director of the Women’s Center at Abyan University.^[7] She also cited a pervasive view that women cannot handle the responsibilities associated with senior positions, making it difficult for female academics to progress career-wise.

Challenging Conditions for Female Academics Amidst War

How will we have female academics if girls are dropping out of the education system?

Dr. Nada Shafik General Director of the Women’s Center at Abyan University

Ten Yemeni female academics were interviewed for this research and asked about some of the main challenges they and women in higher education in Yemen face. Respondents held a range of different positions, from deans to assistant professors and general academic staff, and came from universities in Sana’a, Aden, Taiz, Hadramawt, Al-Mahra, Dhamar, and Abyan.

For most, the weight of the war has taken center stage. Dr. Angela al-Ma’amari, Assistant Professor of Mental Health and Head of the Department of Psychology at Taiz University, described a feeling of hopelessness in the face of the conflict’s impact on Yemen’s academic environment and the deterioration of university education.^[8] War has wrought havoc on educational infrastructure, according to Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women’s Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University. Teaching materials and equipment have been looted, while many classrooms and university buildings lack functioning lighting and restrooms. She also noted that Taiz University lacks any faculty lounge for female academics.^[9] Dr. Samira Khwaiter, an academic staff member at the Faculty of Education at Al-Mahra University,^[10] said many teachers have shifted focus toward helping both students and fellow colleagues deal with the difficult circumstances of war.

^[5] At the administrative level, the situation is different, with the number of female staff slightly exceeding the number of men. The same applies further down the academic career ladder: there were 104 female instructors compared to 81 male instructors, and 282 female lecturers compared to 274 male lecturers.

^[6] Interview with Dr. Nada Shafik, General Director of the Women’s Center at Abyan University and Associate Professor at the Zinjibar College of Education, May 2024.

^[7] Ibid.

^[8] Interview with Dr. Angela al-Ma’amari, Assistant Professor of Mental Health and Head of the Department of Psychology at Taiz University, March 2024.

^[9] Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women’s Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

^[10] Interview with Dr. Samira Khwaiter, academic staff member at the Faculty of Education in Al-Mahra University, May 2024.

Dedication to serving others spurs many to persevere, but continuing in the sector, or aspiring to embark on an academic career, has become exceedingly difficult given the dire economic constraints crippling Yemen. Like all public employees in Houthi-controlled regions, employees at Sana'a University do not receive regular salaries. A former female academic from Sana'a University noted that some of her colleagues were the primary breadwinners of their families, and due to unpaid salaries, entire families lost their sole income.^[11] In areas outside Houthi control, the depreciation of the Yemeni rial means salaries no longer cover the cost of basic necessities. Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Director of the Science and Technology Center at the University of Aden, said that her monthly salary, previously worth around US\$1,000, is currently equivalent to approximately US\$225.^[12] The economic crisis has also created an atmosphere of frustration, which inevitably affects the quality of education and academic services, said Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at Aden University.^[13]

While all academics are affected by the economic crisis, some challenges are particular to women. Travel outside the country has been cut, with universities unable to afford airline tickets and associated expenses.^[14] Even before the war, however, opportunities to attend events abroad were primarily given to men.^[15] The reality is that "men enjoy more freedom to move compared to women," according to an assistant professor at Dhamar University.^[16] Such bias also applies to scholarships. While women may receive internal scholarships to complete postgraduate studies, they will rarely be granted scholarships abroad. Dr. Shafik from Abyan University estimated that female students are granted only one in ten scholarships available, with the rest going to male students.

This reality carries broader implications. Societal and family norms not only restrict women's freedom of movement in Yemen but also undermine their right to pursue their vocation. Poor security conditions have made travel more risky for women, as has the threat of defamation campaigns and incitement against women in the public and digital sphere.^[17] Political polarization has also increased during the conflict. Interviews with women from universities in Taiz and Sana'a indicated that while party affiliation played a significant role in the pre-war period, often dictating who got specific opportunities or received promotions, divisions now are not only political, but also regional and sometimes sectarian.

^[11] Interview with a former female academic at Sana'a University, April 2024.

^[12] Interview with Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Professor in the Department of Chemistry, College of Education, at Aden University, April 2024.

^[13] Interview with Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Aden, May 2024.

^[14] Phone interview with Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Professor at the Department of Chemistry, College of Education, at Aden University, April 2024.

^[15] Interview with a former female academic at Sana'a University, April 2024.

^[16] Interview with an assistant professor at Dhamar University, May 2024.

^[17] Rim Mugahed, "Absent from the table and shunned from public life: Yemeni women at a crossroads," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/20761>

The Fate of Women's Studies Centers in Yemen

Against this backdrop, the experience of women's studies centers, set up in universities to advance knowledge on gender dynamics and women's lived experiences, are important to note in the context of Yemen. The notorious incitement campaign against Dr. Raufah Hassan in the 1990s eventually led to the shuttering of Sana'a University's Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center and prompted her exit from the country.^[18] Thirty years later, there has been little change in attitudes toward gender equality initiatives in Yemen, which are often regarded by more conservative elements of society as a violation of local Islamic values that encourage moral degradation. Such discourse, often led by conservative religious scholars, academics, and politicians, continues to fuel wide-scale incitement campaigns.

At Taiz University, as dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi came under attack after the university approved the inclusion of a Gender and Women's Development program in their postgraduate curricula in 2023.^[19] Dr. Al-Hakimi said the campaign further intensified with the opening of a Women's Protection Unit within the center in 2024,^[20] set up to combat and protect women and girls from all forms of violence and discrimination at the university.^[21] Al-Hakimi said local conservative religious leaders "made inflammatory statements in mosques against the center's activities, alleging that the Women Protection Unit at the Center constitutes an assault against Islamic values and principles, and accusing Taiz University of inappropriate conduct as an educational institution in a Muslim country."^[22]

Meanwhile, the Center for Women's Studies at Aden University has been active for more than 23 years. "Aden's educational environment is still relatively favorable compared to other environments," said Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, the center's director.^[23] The center offers a master's program, and over 25 percent of its students are male. Still, Ba'alawi noted that the center has "refrained from engaging in any intellectual discussions about mainstreaming gender to avoid cultural controversy," adding that the "concept of gender is still vague for many."^[24]

A Glimmer of Hope

Overall, there were mixed opinions regarding the future prospects for Yemeni women in academia, with some expressing more hope than others. Residents in areas under Houthi control invariably noted the imposition of restrictive measures against all women that make the life of female academics increasingly difficult.

^[18] The Women's Studies Center at Sana'a University has changed its name multiple times. Its current appellation, the *Comprehensive Development Research Center*, has no reference to either women's studies or gender, per the University President's Decision (no. 60) adopted in 2023.

^[19] "Taiz University in the Crosshairs [AR]," *Yemen Future*, June 22, 2023, <https://yemenfuture.net/news/15174>

^[20] Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

^[21] "Opening of a women's protection unit at the Women's Studies Center at Taiz University [AR]," *Yemen Future*, February 18, 2024, <https://yemenfuture.net/news/20627>

^[22] Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

^[23] Interview with Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Aden, May 2024

^[24] Ibid.

Policies such as the mahram (guardian) requirements that a woman travel with a male relative, and violence directed against any critical voices in the public sphere, have played a clear role in the overall decline of women in the academic field in Sana'a. In Abyan, respondents cited the weight of the war and its negative impact on gender dynamics, resulting in the retreat of women from the public sphere, while in Taiz, sharp political polarization and incitement by ultra-conservative religious groups stood out more as the primary issue.

Despite the socially conservative traditions typically associated with Hadramawt, Dr. Fathia Bahashwan, Director of the Center for Human and Social Studies at Hadramawt University,^[25] expressed a sense of optimism. "Social conditions have prompted more women to go out for work," she said. "Most of the newly appointed contract teaching staff in the governorate are female lecturers. More female students have begun to complete higher studies than before, and the view of girls and parents towards education has changed. This does not go against local customs and traditions."^[26]

Other academics noted that the changes brought on by conflict have allowed women to break from previously imposed restrictions – often with support from male relatives or colleagues – and become pioneers and role models for girls in their communities. The assistant professor at Dhamar University cited an increase in female representation at the university: "For example, we have a woman as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and a woman as Dean of the Faculty of Administrative Sciences. Many women are faculty members, and a lot of them are involved in administration at the university."^[27]

Testimonies from Yemeni female academics offer a glimmer of hope in a fragile state where violence permeates every aspect of life, particularly against women. Ultimately, the struggle and triumphs of women in academia pay testament to how Yemeni women at large have managed to carve out a path for themselves, breaking one barrier after another with quiet determination and patience, despite all adversity. This is particularly poignant given the recent wave of arrests in Houthi-controlled areas and the sense of foreboding among Yemenis about what the future holds.^[28]

^[25] Interview with Dr. Fathia Bahashwan, Director of the Center for Human and Social Studies at Hadramawt University, April 2024.

^[26] Ibid.

^[27] Interview with an assistant professor at Dhamar University, May 2024.

^[28] Beatrice Farhat, "Yemen's Houthis arrest UN, rights workers in Sanaa," Al Monitor, June 7, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/06/yemens-houthis-arrest-un-rights-workers-sanaa>

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*This analysis is part of a series of articles examining the role of women working in various fields in Yemen, including education, diplomacy, journalism, and civil society. It 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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