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COVER PHOTO: Intisar al-Qadi speaking during a workshop with Yemeni tribal figures organized by the Sana'a Center and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation in Toledo, Spain, on September 11, 2021 // Annima Peltone/CMI.



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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.

## INTRODUCTION

As the war in Yemen enters its seventh year, the situation appears bleak and opportunities for peace grow fewer by the day. Amid the country's fragmentation, the emergence of de-facto authorities and the almost complete absence of the state, local communities must rely on themselves to maintain peace. In this context, tribes have emerged as a decisive factor in maintaining social cohesion and security. But their ability to perform this role has been weakened by the political and sectarian polarization that existed even before the war erupted.

The tribe is one of the most significant social models in managing community cohesion and security in Yemen, particularly taking into consideration the erosion of other local mechanisms of negotiation and mediation. The situation is complicated by the presence of local actors affiliated with regional powers and their associated forces, whether they are affiliated directly, such as the Saudi-led coalition and its allies, or indirectly, such as the armed Houthi movement and Iran.

Currently, Yemeni women face an unprecedented situation. Traditional social values focus on protecting women and hold that attacks on them during wartime are shameful. Yemeni society had long prided itself on maintaining such norms, but they have collapsed in the current conflict. Women have been subjected to targeting by snipers,<sup>[1]</sup> detention and forced disappearances,<sup>[2]</sup> sexual violence<sup>[3]</sup> and displacement.<sup>[4]</sup> This is in addition to the forced recruitment of their children into armed forces and separation from the men in their family via recruitment, murder and detention.<sup>[5]</sup>

Rights Radar, a civil society organization, documented 16,667 abuses against women committed by various parties to the conflict between September 21, 2014, and December 31, 2019.<sup>[6]</sup> The violence included 919 killed and 1,952 wounded due to airstrikes, artillery shelling, drones, landmines, explosive devices, shootings

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[1] "Pregnant woman shot dead by Houthi sniper in northern Yemen," Al Arabiya, October 9, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2018/10/09/Pregnant-woman-shot-dead-by-Houthi-sniper-in-northern-Yemen>

[2] Maggie Michael, "Yemeni Group: Houthi Rebels Hold, Torture Female Detainees," Associated Press (AP), January 17, 2019, <https://apnews.com/0b4af81e4c1a4e5abce813d5eacdd975>

[3] "A Tragedy Without Justice: Human Rights in Yemen in 2021," Mwatana for Human Rights, 2020, p. 84, <https://mwatana.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Human-Rights-in-Yemen-in-2020-En-1.pdf>

[4] Jean-Nicolas Beuze, "Women struggle to get by as Yemen conflict hits six-year mark," UNHCR, March 31, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2021/3/6064216c4/women-struggle-yemen-conflict-hits-six-year-mark.html>

[5] "Militarized Childhood: A report on the Houthis' recruitment of Yemeni children during war," Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor & SAM for Rights and Liberties, February 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/childreneyemenrepen.pdf>

[6] "Yemen: Women in the Storm of War," Rights Radar, March 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports/Yemen%20Women%20in%20Storm%20of%20the%20War%20.pdf>

and indiscriminate gunfire, and 384 cases of abduction, enforced disappearance and torture.<sup>[7]</sup> While the Saudi-led coalition has repeatedly bombed homes and residential areas, and there have been numerous documented cases of kidnappings and human rights violations in areas controlled by the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council, it is the armed Houthi movement that has committed the most violations against women.<sup>[8]</sup> Women in Houthi-controlled areas have been subjected to torture, humiliation, abduction and forced disappearance. Many were imprisoned in solitary cells with their children without informing their families.<sup>[9]</sup> According to other reports, minors were raped and elderly women were tortured.<sup>[10]</sup> These violations occurred in a social context where women who are subjected to sexual abuse are treated as offenders and not as victims.<sup>[11]</sup> Some victims of sexual abuse have committed suicide, others have been killed by their parents to preserve family “honor.”<sup>[12]</sup>

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[7] “Yemen: Women in the Storm of War,” Rights Radar, March 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports/Yemen%20Women%20in%20Storm%20of%20the%20War%20.pdf>

[8] “Yemen: Women in the Storm of War,” Rights Radar, March 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports/Yemen%20Women%20in%20Storm%20of%20the%20War%20.pdf>

[9] Isabel Debre, “Women who dare dissent targeted for abuse by Yemen’s rebels,” AP News, April 29, 2020, [https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/02/27/Houthis-use-of-sexual-violence-as-a-weapon-against-wom](https://apnews.com/article/sanaa-virus-outbreak-yemen-ap-top-news-international-news-0ba4a955901572c1ce013a6045fba49a?utm_medium=AP&utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2ECtgDQINREYofn-CFcgVG7KZR_jNPPHDhvDlIiSRCyaDV5dPvDfzvzgs; Ismaeel Naar, “Houthis’ use of sexual violence as a weapon against women is a terrible crime: UK,” Al Arabiya English, February 27, 2021, <a href=); CJ Werleman, “Women Survivors of Houthi Prisons Speak Out Against Their Abusers,” Inside Arabia, March 8, 2021, <https://insidearabia.com/women-survivors-of-houthi-prisons-speak-out-against-their-abusers/>; “Mothers at the Gates of Justice 2, Fifth Annual Report of the Abductees’ Mothers Association 2020”, Abductees’ Mothers Association, 2021, <http://ama-ye.org/up/MOTHERS%20ON%20THE%20GATES%20OF%20JUSTICE%202.pdf>

[10] “Women in Yemen: Continuous Suffering and Horrific Violations [AR],” SAM for Rights and Liberties, March 2021, <https://samrl.org/pdf/1Women%20in%20yemen%20report.pdf>

[11] This includes young girls. In July 2017, the cleric Abdullah al-Adini justified the rape of a three-year-old girl by saying that young girls’ “clothes” are the “gateway” to rape. “A Yemeni cleric causes controversy on social media: ‘The clothes of young girls are a gateway to rape’ [AR],” Al-Anbaa, April 4, 2017, <http://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/last/757932/04-07-2017-رجل-دين-يعني-يثير-الجدل-مواقع-التواصل-ملابس-الصغيرات-بوابة-للاغتصاب>

[12] “Yemen: Women in the Storm of War,” Rights Radar, March 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports/Yemen%20Women%20in%20Storm%20of%20the%20War%20.pdf>; “Girl killed in Yemen in shocking circumstances: Perpetrators must be held accountable,” Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, March 19, 2020, <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/3427/Girl-killed-in-Yemen-in-shocking-circumstances:-Perpetrators-must-be-held-accountable>

The armed Houthi movement seized control of Yemen's northern and western regions, where the influence of tribal systems remains strong, and imposed an authoritarian system, violently targeting those who opposed it.<sup>[13]</sup> They forced men to join their ranks,<sup>[14]</sup> leaving women particularly vulnerable. Other women have been left without protection after men, especially tribesmen, went to the frontlines to fight.<sup>[15]</sup>

Due to the exceptional circumstances that the war has created, more women have broken from their traditional social roles. Some have used traditional tools, such as tribal customs, to fill roles that had been exclusive to men, such as mediating to resolve family and local disputes, negotiating the release and exchange of prisoners, intervening to secure certain areas and protect public interests and contributing to reopening roads and airports.

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[13] Mohammed Alkhereiji, "Houthis intensify crackdown on dissent in Yemen," The Arab Weekly, April 23, 2017, <https://thearabweekly.com/houthis-intensify-crackdown-dissent-yemen>

[14] "Yemen's Houthis order compulsory conscription of civilians," Middle East Monitor, May 6, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200506-yemens-houthis-order-compulsory-conscription-of-civilians>

[15] "From The Ground Up: Gender and Conflict Analysis in Yemen," CARE, Oxfam & IASC, October 2016, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/rr-yemen-gender-conflict-analysis-201016-en\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/rr-yemen-gender-conflict-analysis-201016-en_0.pdf); 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/files/A\\_Gendered\\_Crisis\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf)

## METHODOLOGY

For this paper, eight interviews were conducted with women from different tribal and regional backgrounds: Hiyam al-Qarmoushi from Shabwa; Sheikha Hadiya al-Buraihi and Maeen al-Obaidi from Taiz; Dhiaa al-Aweeni and Sulaf al-Hanashi from Hadramawt; Ashwaq Awshan from Al-Mahra; Warda Mujawar from Al-Jawf and Intisar al-Qadi from Marib.

Al-Qarmoushi, Al-Obaidi, Mujawar and Al-Qadi were interviewed in person and by phone on multiple occasions, while the rest of the interviews were conducted by phone and WhatsApp conversations. Geographically, the interviewees represent southern, eastern and central Yemen. It was not possible to conduct interviews with women from the north for this research given the current security situation, especially in Houthi-controlled areas. Interviews, in-person and virtual, took place between November 2020 and December 2021.

In addition to these interviews, there were online “brainstorming” sessions with experts in tribal affairs: Najwa Adra, an anthropologist who specializes in Yemeni tribal societies; Ahmed al-Arami, a researcher focusing on social and tribal structures and transformations in Yemen; and Mohammed al-Kathiri, a social activist and researcher belonging to the Al-Kathir tribe in Hadramawt.

The aim of the interviews was to explore the factors that motivate women to participate in mediation and conflict resolution and the constraints that prevent them from doing so, in addition to the different challenges that exist between regions. We also explored the extent of the influence of family, class, religion and position in the tribe, as well as other personal characteristics of the women involved in peacemaking.

Interviewees agreed that tribal customs and religion are not necessarily in contradiction and in fact can complement one another. They noted that the state’s official laws are derived from tribal customs, which still govern social traditions.

It must be noted that the use of the term “traditional societies” in this paper does not mean that all of Yemeni society is tribal, nor that tribal societies across Yemen share the same traditions, particularly with regard to women. Each society or tribe sets different rules regarding behavior, and it is difficult to codify such differences or compare them in totality, especially as many tribal customs change over time and are not written down. But all of those interviewed referenced the particularity of the status of women in tribal communities. Intisar al-Qadi from Marib, Hiyam al-Qarmoushi from Shabwa and Mohammed al-Kathiri from Hadramawt all said that women are protected and looked after inside strict tribal systems. This may negatively impact women as the gap widens between their traditional roles

and current realities. With the increase of educational opportunities and more chances to participate in public life and attain a job in the public sector, the protective rules that are intended to shield women from external risks are coming into conflict with women's desire to participate in the public sphere.

## TRIBAL CUSTOMS AS A TOOL IN ARMED DISPUTES

Tribal customs are rules that organize the economic, social, military and political life of tribesmen, both within one tribe and among different tribes. A modern state has been in place in Yemen since the 1960s, however, in the north, its presence has largely been characterized by weakness and absence, especially in remote areas and tribal communities. In such areas, state laws never fully replaced traditional laws.

Tribal customs include imposing penalties on individuals or groups if they commit violations. Certain places, such as markets and mosques, and social segments, such as women, children and the Sayyid class (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed), fall under the protection of tribes.<sup>[16]</sup> Penalties vary depending on the extent of the damage and the motives of the perpetrators. Tribal customs clarify a tribe's responsibilities in cases of violence or conflict, but they are characterized by their flexibility. Tribal customs also organize the use of economic resources, such as pastures, water resources and logging in designated areas, as well as the security of tribe members and the granting of asylum.<sup>[17]</sup>

Part of these customs pertain to women and emphasize treating women as a protected group. Shame is inflicted on those who harass or abuse women. The penalty for attacking women is known as Al-Marboua', and stipulates financial compensation worth the diyya (blood money) of four women if the attack is unintentional. If the attack is intentional, other penalties are also imposed on the perpetrators, such as public denunciation.<sup>[18]</sup>

But tribal customs also grant women advantages that they can use to stop violence and prevent fighting. For instance, tribal customs prohibit targeting a man who is accompanied by a woman, even if he has committed murder. A wanted man may seek the protection of a woman until the issue is peacefully resolved. The worst crime, dubbed "black shame", is "any attack on a guest, a vulnerable individual, an individual who is under the tribe's protection, a stranger [or] a non-Muslim, [which] requires social mobilization against the perpetrator and entails strict penalties that include financial compensation and diyyas whose value may reach forty times what sharia and official laws stipulate."<sup>[19]</sup>

[16] Marieke Brandt, "Some Remarks on Blood Vengeance (tha'r) in Contemporary Yemen," in *Tribes in Modern Yemen: An Anthology*, ed. Marieke Brandt, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, Vienna, 2021. p. 68.

[17] Mohammed al-Najar, Abdulmalik Eissa, Nuoraia Shujaa Addin and Al-Hassan al-Qotary, "Yemeni Traditional Tools for Disputes Resolution and the Role of Women and Men," Youth Leadership Development Foundation, 2018, <https://www.yldf.org/uploads/publications/WLP-%20Traditional%20Peace%20Tools%20Study%20-%20English%20Version%20-%20Final%20.pdf>; Fadel Abu Ghanem, *Tribe and State in Yemen*, Al-Manar, Cairo, 1990, p.175-176.

[18] Mohammed al-Najar, Abdulmalik Eissa, Nuoraia Shujaa Addin and Al-Hassan al-Qotary, "Yemeni Traditional Tools for Disputes Resolution and the Role of Women and Men [AR]," Youth Leadership Development Foundation, 2018, <http://www.yldf.org/uploads/publications/الادوات%20التقليدية%20البيمنية%20لحل%20النزاعات%20ودور%20النساء%20والرجال.pdf>

[19] Abdelrazzaq al-Hattami, "The Black Shame: a social system contract that is breaking apart [AR]," *As-Safir Al-Arabi*, September 16, 2021, <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/40354/2021/09/16/العييب-الأسود-منظومة-عقد-اجتماعي-يتعثر>



## MEDIATION IN WORK SETTINGS

One interesting experience is that of Hiyam al-Qarmoushi from Shabwa. Al-Qarmoushi was the first woman director of a girls' school in her area. Discussing the difficulties that women may face in public posts in tribal societies, Al-Qarmoushi said that as girls' education is still not widely available in tribal areas, establishing a girls' school headed by a woman was an achievement. She explained that tribes' internal disputes were reflected by the students and vice versa. The simplest dispute between two students might turn into a huge argument among tribes or families. During Al-Qarmoushi's tenure, a simple problem between two girls almost led to the school's closure, and she was forced to intervene behind the scenes using traditional tools to resolve the dispute. Al-Qarmoushi said she had to be "the first one to arrive at work and the last to leave," in order to keep the school open. Al-Qarmoushi said she faced many challenges at work, but was able to use her tribal background to better perform her public sector job.

Mohammed al-Kathiri from Hadramawt spoke about a case he came across during his work as an activist. A young woman starting a job in the public sector was surprised on her first day, when women from her area visited her mother to advise against her working, even offering financial help if needed on condition that she stop going to work. Her employment was perceived as a violation of tradition, which stipulates that women must be under the protection of a guardian for financial and moral purposes. This reflects the ambivalent power of tribal traditions; they can act as a double-edged sword that oppresses women in some circumstances but protects them in others.

## WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE FAMILY AND TRIBE

Women's key role in resolving disputes was acknowledged in UN Resolution 1325, which reaffirms women's roles in resolving disputes, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, humanitarian response and reconstruction after conflicts end. Ahmad al-Arami, a researcher in tribal affairs, said there are no rules preventing more women from undertaking such work. "There is no text in tribal customs that stipulates women have a certain role and tasks as a [mediator], as women are [under the guardianship of men]. What some women [have done in terms of mediation] is exceptional. The tribal text did not prevent them from mediating – hence, just like there is no text that stipulates assigning this role, there is also no text that stipulates preventing them from assuming this role."<sup>[20]</sup>

Women play major roles in resolving disputes in the nuclear family, neighborhood, village, tribe and even on a national level. Intisar al-Qadi, from the Early Warning Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding, said it is uncommon for women to interfere in the affairs of another tribe, even if they are playing the role of mediator or trying to resolve a dispute, as "her family and tribe fear she will be mistreated by the other tribe. Any mistreatment, even if verbal, can cause a problem that's larger than the one she is attempting to resolve, since assaulting a woman is a 'black shame', and a tribe can entirely mobilize to defend her."<sup>[21]</sup> There is a high sensitivity toward women, their status and the need to protect them; however, there are boundaries which restrict women's activities and which contribute to their status as "vulnerable" individuals. While a male mediator may be belittled or his efforts rejected when trying to resolve a dispute, there is no fear that the tribe's honor will be insulted, as would be the case if the mediator were a woman. Women represent the tribe's "honor", and the male relatives of a woman mediator may fear any insult or attack against her, as these could be blamed on the woman and family.

The mediation which women undertake is often unofficial. Al-Qarmoushi said that for tribesmen in Shabwa, mediation and conflict resolution only relate to vendettas between tribes, and that other matters are considered insignificant. But she believes that ignoring and underestimating other disputes is a mistake and that women are contributing on a daily basis to resolving these overlooked conflicts. The majority of women who were interviewed noted that their first experience in resolving disputes began at the family and neighborhood level. These efforts are not considered official contributions in resolving disputes and peacemaking in local communities. Sheikah Hadiya al-Buraihi described women's invisible

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[20] Authors' interview via Zoom with researcher Ahmed al-Arami, November 2020.

[21] Authors' phone interview with Intisar al-Qadi, November 2020.

role, saying women had prevented male relatives from participating in armed disputes and urged them not to join in the fighting. Al-Qadi added that women work behind the scenes, pressuring men to accept peace, de-escalate problems, accept solutions and make concessions. This often happens at home rather than during meetings, which are often dominated by men. Al-Qarmoushi noted the significance of this work, saying that just as a woman is capable of igniting a conflict by inciting men, she is also capable of avoiding a conflict by encouraging men to accept peaceful solutions.

## APPLICATION OF TRIBAL CUSTOMS IN MEDIATION

Women benefit from the advantages which tribal customs grant as they can be used to protect them amid the current conflict. This may contribute to the resolution of conflicts on different levels across Yemen. One of the advantages which women can employ is their ability to prevent a dispute simply by being present, or by imposing their protection until a dispute is resolved. For Intisar al-Qadi, who is well acquainted with tribal practices and hails from a tribal sheikh's family, it was not difficult for her to use her capabilities to prevent a conflict within the tribal area where she lives. One man had killed another by accident, and while he was at jail awaiting trial, tribal mediation convinced the victim's family to forgive the perpetrator and expelled him from the tribe as a punishment. However, one of the victim's brothers did not accept this settlement and planned to avenge the death by killing the perpetrator on his release from jail. The perpetrator's family sought Al-Qadi's help, and she volunteered to go to the prison and accompany him to the house of a sheikh, where the victim's family agreed to grant the killer amnesty. She succeeded in saving the perpetrator's life, as according to tribal customs, the victim's brother could not harm him because she was present. If he had tried, it would have been viewed as an attack on Al-Qadi herself and had serious repercussions. This protection can be seen from two angles. The first is that women have a status that elevates them above tribal "blood" laws. The second is that women are perceived as weak, and whoever seeks their protection is also perceived as weak. Just as it is shameful to target a woman, it's also shameful to target whoever has sought her protection.

## FAMILIAL AND NATIONAL MEDIATION

Dhiaa al-Aweeni, from the Al-Kathir tribe in Hadramawt, summarized relations between female leaders in tribal societies and the family: “Women in our society derive their strength from the men in [their] family. If they support her, the society will accept her and respect her, but if they do not support her, the society will not accept her even if she is right.”<sup>[22]</sup> This sentiment was echoed by Najwa Adra, an anthropologist who specializes in Yemeni tribal societies, who said that traditional societies grant women a status based on the status of the men in their families – the lower the status, the less protection and respect a woman enjoys.<sup>[23]</sup>

Family plays the largest role in empowering “non-traditional” women in traditional societies, not just in terms of security, but also in terms of creating space for work and for lessening the chance of societal rejection. A family’s blessing grants legitimacy to any role performed by a woman. As a majority of Yemeni families are large, women may have opportunities to play the role of mediator within the family itself. These disputes are often the first conflicts which women handle. They then use these skills to get involved in civil society and take on larger roles. Al-Qarmoushi, a social and tribal activist from Shabwa, contributes to resolving disputes on the local level and is also a trainer in mediation and mechanisms to limit conflicts. In 2015, she intervened to get Houthi gunmen out of a building they were occupying in her neighborhood in Ataq, the governorate capital, in order to prevent the area from being targeted by airstrikes. She gave her neighbors two choices: either they go peacefully to the Houthis or she would go herself. Al-Qarmoushi’s efforts were successful in arranging their peaceful departure.

Al-Aweeni, who learned about tribal customs and mechanisms by listening to elderly family members, provided an example from her experience in Hadramawt. She said a dispute erupted between two families planning the wedding of their children over gold which was to be gifted to the bride. The dispute nearly resulted in the wedding being called off, and may have escalated into a larger problem between the two families were it not for her intervention. Sheikha Hadiya al-Buraihi, from Taiz, said many problems erupt between families and neighbors, and she intervenes to resolve them either because she is asked to by the parties or because she chooses to mediate directly to avoid a larger problem.

Sulaf al-Hanashi is a member of Hadramawt Women for Peace, an organization that worked on reopening the Al-Rayyan airport and the Al-Dabbah International Road. Al-Rayyan airport was closed after Al-Qaeda entered Mukalla in 2015,

[22] Authors’ phone interview with Dhiyaa al-Aweeni, Hadramawt, August 2021.

[23] Najwa Adra, “Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen,” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, July 2016, p. 317, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305110160\\_Tribal\\_Mediation\\_and\\_Empowered\\_Women\\_Potential\\_Contributions\\_of\\_Heritage\\_to\\_National\\_Development\\_in\\_Yemen](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305110160_Tribal_Mediation_and_Empowered_Women_Potential_Contributions_of_Heritage_to_National_Development_in_Yemen)

while the Al-Dhabba road, an important route to the east, was later closed for security reasons. The closures had a negative impact on the lives of ordinary people. Sulaf and her female colleagues led a large advocacy campaign in 2018 and were able to partially open the road, and are still fighting to open the airport. Though they are not using tribal mechanisms, they are successfully operating in an area characterized by tribalism and traditionalism.

Ashwaq Awshan, from Al-Mahra, launched a campaign in 2018 demanding the expulsion of Salafis who settled in Al-Mahra that year. They were formerly based in Dammaj in Sa'ada governorate but were expelled in 2014, after many rounds of fighting with Houthi forces. She said that while she does not hold a grudge against anyone, these individuals were "extremists", and she feared that their presence could destabilize civil and social peace in her home governorate.

Maeen al-Obaidi mediates on the front lines of the conflict in Taiz. A lawyer who often handled the cases of poor women before the war, Al-Obaidi is currently negotiating the opening of roads and the exchange of prisoners and the bodies of the dead. She explained that she talks to the warring parties in their language, uses traditional mediation mechanisms and maintains her neutrality, as her efforts would fail if she were perceived to have taken sides. Al-Obaidi said that even when she works for weeks to open a road, she is fully aware that it will be closed again. Nevertheless, she tries to persuade the two sides to reopen it so that people may cross between the two parts of besieged Taiz city. She said that it is often not possible to return men to their families alive, so she tries - at the very least - to arrange the return of the bodies that are left in the streets.<sup>[24]</sup>

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[24] Authors' interview with Maeen al-Obaidi, Spain, September 2021.

## SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY

Based on the interviews, it does not appear to be a necessary condition that a woman hail from a sheikhs' family in order to take a larger role in society. Many women have pursued a path that their male relatives did not necessarily pursue. Interviewees agreed that the primary factors of a woman's success in the traditional sphere pertain to the extent of her courage, self-confidence and awareness of what she's facing, as well as support from the family.

While personal courage is necessary for women to take on leading roles within their communities, this agency is shaped in part by their social standing and that of their husbands, fathers and family members within their communities. The social status of the family, specifically its men, not only contributes to the social agency of women but also determines the reach of their safety net, said anthropologist Najwa Adra. "Women's safety nets protect them only if their fathers and brothers are decent, but their resources are limited if they do not have the support of their families."<sup>[25]</sup> A number of other interrelated factors can influence their position, such as a family's financial resources and the social networks in which the women and their families participate.<sup>[26]</sup>

As Al-Aweeni noted, a woman's religious and intellectual capital might also be leveraged for leadership roles within their community. All of the women interviewed for this paper are educated and hold degrees in various fields. This indicates two characteristics: they had the financial resources to complete their studies and, to some extent, open-minded families who supported their education. The majority of the women interviewed are involved in civic work, either directly, with civil society organizations, or through personal initiatives. This indicates the social position they have created for themselves, which may be a result of their non-traditional roles or vice versa.

We can summarize the sources of legitimacy for women involved in social activity accordingly. First is the social capital of their family within the tribe's hierarchy, which can be influenced by religious and economic factors, as it is difficult for women who belong to poor or socially marginalized families to engage in mediation or conflict resolution. Second is the personality of the woman herself, which may allow her to impose herself through and against traditional social norms.

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[25] Najwa Adra, "Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, July 2016, 5(2):301-337, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305110160\\_Tribal\\_Mediation\\_and\\_Empowered\\_Women\\_Potential\\_Contributions\\_of\\_Heritage\\_to\\_National\\_Development\\_in\\_Yemen](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305110160_Tribal_Mediation_and_Empowered_Women_Potential_Contributions_of_Heritage_to_National_Development_in_Yemen)

[26] C. Ling and A. Dale, "Agency and Social Capital: Characteristics and Dynamics," *Community Development Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2014, pp. 4-6.



## SOCIETAL RESPONSE

A variety of factors can influence the degree to which women are accepted in non-traditional roles. According to Al-Aweeni, “Sometimes a woman’s piety is what makes her more accepted, and sometimes her education and strong character grant her society’s respect and acceptance. Sometimes it’s the family’s prestige or economic situation. However, the most important factor is the woman’s capability, as this is mandatory to perform the role of resolving conflicts because it grants her the confidence to play a leading role and other factors are no longer a [necessary] condition.” She added that if there is a problem, the injured parties may not care about the gender of the mediator, as all that matters is resolving the dispute and avoiding violence. In general, tribal men respect and honor a strong woman. All the women who were interviewed are married. Some of them became involved in social work before marriage and others afterward. They all said marriage did not affect their involvement in social work, though married women may have a wider remit to intervene. However, marriage was not deemed a necessary condition of involvement, and not described as making a significant difference. Al-Aweeni said her work may embarrass her husband at times, because he directly communicates with other tribesmen, but that this has not prevented her from working and he has not asked her to stop. Al-Hanashi said there is a noticeable increase in the acceptance of women’s work in the field of conflict resolution and increased awareness of the importance of women’s participation in these roles.



## CONCLUSION

The war has impacted all of Yemeni society, but women are often the most affected, facing death, displacement and insecurity. With the men being killed or otherwise preoccupied with the fighting, women have had to take full responsibility for looking after their families. Studies have shown an increase in gender-based violence.<sup>[27]</sup> Amid the fighting, Yemeni women have tried to play more active roles in conflict resolution. Although these roles are often not officially acknowledged and limited to achieving peace in local communities, other women are working at an official level and demanding more support and attention to their contributions.

Women have been successful mediators both within and outside tribal frameworks, but their contributions are nevertheless marginalized. Warring sides and constituent political parties do not recognize women's roles, are dismissive of their efforts and exclude them from official posts. Sulaf from Hadramawt noted that the current government does not include any women, adding: "If there were women participating in peace talks, we would have seen progress in these talks."

There are no signs of imminent peace – fighting continues on several fronts – and the conflict is no longer limited to two parties, but has further deteriorated to involve multiple belligerents and their regional supporters.

Under such circumstances, options are scarce. But glimmers of hope shine through in efforts to encourage a return to pre-war norms and the pacts, covenants and codes of conduct that governed a more peaceful society. History suggests that women are central in such efforts, and though they bear the burden of men's wars, they can mitigate their impact, using whatever tools of de-escalation available.

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[27] 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/files/A\\_Gendered\\_Crisis\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf)

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