

Women's Networks Shaping Economic and Social Empowerment in Hadramawt



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Cover photo: View of the creek area of Mukalla in Hadramawt on August 2, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas.




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Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights how women's networks in Hadramawt governorate have provided crucial support for Yemeni women, helping them overcome professional barriers in a social context where traditional norms often restrict their public roles. Across various professional fields, Hadrami women have credited much of their success to the assistance provided by and opportunities afforded through women's networks. Both formal and informal, these networks serve as essential support systems, providing women with emotional guidance, professional growth, access to information, mentorship, and collaborative opportunities, which are key to navigating the barriers to economic participation.

Prominent organizations have helped bridge the gaps between local and broader community resources, connecting women in Hadramawt with influential figures and opening doors to opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible. Such efforts not only enhance women's visibility and leadership in traditionally male-dominated environments, but also foster community resilience. Women's networks have shown the ability to initiate efforts that challenge traditional gender norms and promote social change, as well as play a role in reducing violence against women and children, promoting a safer and more equitable environment.

Given the reported increase in gender-based violence in Yemen since the war, this policy brief argues that supporting women's networks is now more critical than ever. It calls for stronger legal frameworks to protect women and for more substantial organizational support for networks. Such investments are crucial for enabling women to fully leverage these networks' resources, and ensuring that women's contributions are recognized and valued in Hadramawt's ongoing development.

Select Recommendations

- **Empower existing networks** that focus on cultivating women's leadership skills and support those providing industry-specific knowledge and resources. These networks should include mentorship programs linking female students and graduates with experienced professionals, promoting collaboration and skill development.
- **Equip grassroots women's professional groups** with the tools and strategies for establishing well-structured professional networks with increased outreach programs for women in Hadramawt.
- **Encourage women's networks** to form broader alliances with various stakeholders, including NGOs, international organizations, and the private sector. These coalitions can amplify the effectiveness of advocacy efforts and provide a more formidable front in negotiating for women's rights and inclusion.

- **Develop programs** that specifically support the creation and expansion of networks that include influential community figures, such as tribal leaders and local authorities. These networks can facilitate the integration of women's initiatives into mainstream community activities and decision-making processes.
- **Support economic development programs** that target women, offering access to microfinance, entrepreneurship training, and market opportunities. Ensure these programs are accessible by strengthening women's economic networks and connecting them with financial resources.
- **Create secure digital platforms** for women professionals to exchange ideas and seek mentorship. Collaborate with cybersecurity experts and train women's networks to address specific cyber threats targeting women and launch campaigns to educate women on cyber safety and countering GBV in digital platforms.
- **Enhance legal protection** for professional women's groups, NGOs, and civil society organizations, ensuring they can operate without fear of being unjustly targeted or harassed. Fast-track legal processes for organizations facing unjust actions from governmental bodies and support the development and enforcement of anti-discrimination and GBV laws.

1. Introduction

Yemen's decade-long war has had a paradoxical effect on women, both limiting and expanding their roles.^[1] Despite a pervasive shortage of data, numerous reports grounded in qualitative data suggest that Yemeni women are increasingly assuming non-traditional roles as breadwinners and financial providers. This shift is leading them into employment but also involves low-wage, physically demanding jobs.^[2]

In Hadramawt, women's roles have traditionally centered around domestic responsibilities. In rural areas, income-generating activities are often carried out in informal sectors, such as agricultural work, the production of handicrafts, and small-scale trade in local markets.^[3] In Mukalla and other urban parts of Hadramawt, formal employment for women has been more common, predominantly in education, healthcare, or administrative roles in the public sector. The onset of the conflict in 2014, however, appears to be changing the socio-economic landscape, compelling women to increasingly enter the private sector to contribute to household income, a shift primarily driven by war and the ensuing economic hardship faced by Yemeni households.

Studies have recently emerged citing examples of women in Hadramawt starting businesses and working in restaurants and cafés serving female clientele, an uncommon sight before the war.^[4] In addition to providing necessary income, these shifts also appear to show signs of reshaping local perceptions of women's roles in employment and public life. In Seyoun, for example, which has become a refuge for internally displaced people, there have been reports of increased entrepreneurial activity among women, including instances of women taking over their husband's businesses after being widowed.^[5]

Despite evidence of these expanding roles, entrenched conservative norms that restrict women's freedom and mobility continue to hamper women's engagement in the economy and public life. The war has led to a rise in gender-based violence (GBV),^[6] and the deterioration of legal and social protection mechanisms due to political instability and insecurity has had a detrimental impact on women's access to the public sphere.^[7] As a result, more women are turning to both formal and informal networks for advocacy, support, and professional growth,^[8] with some of these networks showing remarkable breakthroughs.

^[1] Dr. Fawziah Al-Ammar and Hannah Patchett, "The Repercussions of War on Women in the Yemeni Workforce," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 23, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/7721>

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] Ibid.

^[5] Ibid.

^[6] Azal al-Salafi, "Yemen's Underground Feminist Movement Forms Shadow Protection Network," Yemen Policy Center, February 2022, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/yemens-underground-feminist-movement-forms-shadow-protection-network/>

^[7] Ibid.

^[8] Mohammed al-Katheri, "Women in Hadramawt Organize to Alleviate Travel Restrictions, Providing a Model for Civic Engagement," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 13, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16051>

A notable example is the Hadramawt Women for Peace initiative. In 2016, a group of eight women launched an advocacy campaign to reopen Al-Rayyan airport and the eastern Al-Dhabba road in Mukalla, which had been closed due to conflict.^[9] As part of the campaign, the women lobbied local authorities, security leaders, community figures, youth, political parties, and the media. Their efforts led to the reopening of the road, and encouraged local residents to organize other advocacy campaigns in support of change. The Hadramawt Women for Peace initiative is an important example of how organized networks can provide Yemeni women with powerful leadership and community engagement platforms.

In this context, this policy brief explores how networks, informal (family ties, social circles, or community connections) and formal (professional associations or networks) support or enhance women's economic participation in Hadramawt. Specifically, it focuses on the impact of professional formal networks on Hadrami women's access to formal employment, career growth, and leadership development, showcasing numerous success stories, while also highlighting the structural challenges faced by organizations promoting these networks.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis primarily draws on Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework,^[10] in addition to the social capital theories of two pioneers in the field of sociology, Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam.^[11] Kabeer, a professor and social economist, contends that empowerment entails individuals being able to make choices and exert control over their lives.^[12] Specifically, Kabeer identifies three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources (access to education, financial assets, and social networks) serve as pre-conditions for empowerment, offering the necessary tools for making choices; agency (actions individuals take to pursue these choices) encompasses everything from decision-making to active participation in social movements; and achievements (the outcomes of these actions) reflect the success in utilizing resources and agency to effect change. Together, these elements show empowerment as a dynamic process from potential power to actualized change. Kabeer's theory of empowerment gains further insight when integrated with theories of social capital and its role in enhancing empowerment. Bourdieu^[13] points out the vital role that networks and social relationships play in accessing resources, while Putnam^[14] expands the scope to the significance of trust, norms, and community engagement in promoting cooperative actions.

^[9] Ibid.

^[10] Naila Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30 (3), pp.435-464, 1999, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>

^[11] Social capital is broadly described as the formation and maintenance of various social interactions that enable individuals and groups to use community resources to achieve common goals. Bourdieu (1986) adds to this foundation by pointing out the vital role that networks and social relationships play in accessing resources, while Putnam (1995), expands the scope to the significance of trust, norms, and community engagement in promoting cooperative actions.

^[12] Naila Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30 (3), pp.435-464, 1999, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>

^[13] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*," New York: Greenwood Press, pp.241-258, 1986, <https://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/sites/socialcapitalgateway.org/files/data/paper/2016/10/18/rbasicsbourdieu1986-theformsofcapital.pdf>

^[14] Robert Putnam, "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital." *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78, 2015, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315748504-30/bowling-alone-america-declining-social-capital-robert-putnam>

Such theories find resonance in a context such as Yemen, where community solidarity and tribal affiliations are central to citizens' social capital, providing critical support and resources during times of conflict.^[15] Yemeni households rely heavily on their social networks for material, financial, and emotional support.^[16] In rural parts in particular, tribal affiliations, community solidarity initiatives, and local mediation efforts prove vital, especially during times of crisis. Social networks in Yemen are also maintained through practices such as sharing resources, lending to others in need and repaying debts, and managing conflicts. Women in particular have played instrumental roles in various initiatives, including in community-level humanitarian assistance, hygiene-related awareness, leading gender-based violence protection projects, and facilitating access to services. The prevalent patriarchal structure in Yemen, however, means that often women have more restricted access to social capital. A 2023 report showed that while social networks form an essential safety net for women, gender disparities in mobility and public visibility can limit them from effectively using social capital to enhance their economic conditions.^[17]

In this context, the application of Kabeer's framework to social capital theories highlights the complexity of empowerment as not just the possession of resources but rather the ability to mobilize these resources to achieve desired personal and professional outcomes. Within this, networking is the process of providing fundamental resources, training, and social connections that can empower women to effect meaningful change in their professions and communities, and thereby enhance their social capital.^[18]

1.2. Methodology

As part of this research, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women leaders from Hadramawt, representing a wide range of professional sectors—business owners, legal professionals, educators, researchers, directors of foundations, and activists involved in human and women's rights. The participants varied in age, educational background, and years of professional experience, offering a comprehensive perspective on the role of networking in women's professional growth. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure participants were knowledgeable and willing to share their experiences. The interviews were conducted between March and April 2024, each lasting one to two hours. Qualitative data analysis software was utilized for managing, coding, and analyzing interview data. In addition to the interviews, a literature review was undertaken to examine existing studies on the state of social capital and women's economic participation in Yemen.

^[15] Becky Carte, "Social capital in Yemen," K4D Helpdesk Report, Institute of Development Studies, July 23, 2017, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5975f1boe5274a2897000012/138-Social-capital-in-Yemen.pdf>

^[16] "Life Goes On in Yemen: Conversations with Yemeni Families as the War Nears Its Eighth Year," ACAPS Analysis Hub, May 22, 2022, https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20220522_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_coping_strategies_o.pdf

^[17] ACAPS, "Women's economic empowerment in the Yemeni context," Thematic Report, June 6 2023, https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230606_acaps_thematic_report_yemen_womens_economic_empowerment_in_the_yemeni_context.pdf and "Life Goes On in Yemen: Conversations with Yemeni Families as the War Nears Its Eighth Year," ACAPS Analysis Hub, May 22, 2022, https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20220522_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_coping_strategies_o.pdf

^[18] Mamata Bhandar, "Women and Business Networking: A Social Capital View," In: Leal Filho, W., Marisa Azul, A., Brandli, L., Lange Salvia, A., Wall, T. (eds) Gender Equality. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2021, Springer, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-319-95687-9_32

2. Testimonies: Empowering Women through Networking

“I struggled with myself and did the impossible to convince my family, challenged my community, and entered an unknown world for me. I do not exaggerate that it was unheard of in a society like mine [Hadramawt] where the only world for women is at home, and they have no experience outside of it. These networks opened up broad horizons for learning and practice for me and other women, changing convictions, spreading awareness, and actually changing [our] reality. -Dhiya Saleh Eidh Al-Owaini^[19]

Irrespective of their professional fields, women interviewed attributed much of their professional success to the support of women's networks and the opportunities they presented. Both formal and informal groups have emerged as instrumental in providing a safety net or enabling women to advance their professional opportunities. Informally, women in Yemen rely on familial and community-based networks for emotional support and practical guidance. These networks are deeply rooted in local customs and daily interactions – both in-person and increasingly through platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Many women cited the critical role of family networks and family support for women. One interviewee emphasized that “the family network is the first step providing support for women,” noting that some women, against all odds and facing a lack of opportunities, have broken barriers and succeeded “because of a relative that pushes them forward.”^[20]

Formal women's professional networks, on the other hand, work to bridge the gap between local and broader community resources.^[21] They help connect individuals to influential figures, opening doors that might otherwise remain closed.^[22] Foremost among the women's groups accredited for providing networking opportunities for women in Hadramawt were the Al-Amal Women's Socio-Cultural Foundation,^[23] a Hadramawt-based non-profit organization promoting education, social, legal, and economic rights of women, and actively working to reduce violence against women and children in Yemen; the Yemen Women's Union, a formal network with extensive reach all over Yemen^[24] that focuses on legal assistance, educational

^[19] Interview with Dhiya Saleh Eidh al-Owaini, Lawyer and Legal Affairs Department Officer, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs office in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[20] Ibid.

^[21] Social capital helps women access opportunities and community resources through three forms: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital is about close-knit relationships like those with family and friends, which provide emotional support and a sense of belonging. Bridging social capital links different social groups, across classes, ethnicity or geography. Linking social capital, however, involves connections with people in positions of power, facilitating access to resources and institutional support. See: Tristan Claridge, “Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking.” Social Capital Research, January 20, 2018, <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Functions-of-Social-Capital.pdf>

^[22] This can backfire, however, if societal views shift negatively. Such relationships can quickly become detrimental, leading to tarnished reputations. A female leader from Hadramawt noted how her connections initially helped but later hindered her as authorities scrutinized and constrained her community work, and even targeted her organization's assets. Interview with female community leader in Hadramawt, April 2024.

^[23] Al-Amal Women's Socio-Cultural Foundation website: <https://alamalwomens.com/>

^[24] The Yemen Women's Union was established in the 1960s and has a membership exceeding one million. It has 23 major branches in different governorates and 165 women's activity centers in different districts. Yemeni Women's Union website: <https://yemenwu.org/en/about/1>

programs, advocacy campaigns to promote gender equality and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women; and the Hadramawt Women for Peace,^[25] which focuses on women's participation in peace efforts and engages multi-stakeholder advocacy across diverse sectors to address community and social issues.

These organizations, among others, have facilitated career development for numerous Hadrami women, offering training, mentorship, financial support and networking opportunities that help them gain employment or further advance their career. Recounting her experience, Azal Abdullah al-Ariqi, Director of Basma Foundation for Child and Women's Development and an activist on legal rights for women and children,^[26] mentioned several local networks (the Community Peace Authority^[27] and Al-Amal Foundation^[28]) and informal media-based networking groups (Her Highness^[29] and Politics and My Right to Participate^[30]) that played a vital role in supporting her career. The social capital built through these networks also helped Al-Ariqi secure financial resources for her organization. Although many of her networks are women-only, and despite the fact that the prevalent conservative background largely prevents the mixing of sexes in a context such as Hadramawt, the involvement of male allies was cited as an additional benefit. In her case, male support was deemed vital in a setting where female judges and lawyers are few and where, until today, many choose male lawyers over females, believing that men possess greater capabilities in litigation and defense.

Dhiya Saleh Eidh al-Owaini, a lawyer, shared how she made extensive use of women's networks. She has been a member of the Yemen Women's Union for 13 years, the Mobaderoon for Development Foundation (a foundation she founded) for nine years, and the Hadramawt Strategic Thinking Team for one year. She joined these networks for "self-growth and to serve the community."^[31] Al-Owaini described how initially lost she felt as a fresh law graduate wanting to work in the legal field. "What would I do with this degree in a society that restricts women from even entering courts for litigation, let alone work in a male-dominated environment?" she asked. "Would my family allow it? Would my society and tribe accept this challenge? Would this affect my children's future, or would we be ostracized? And would I succeed?"^[32]

^[25] Mohammed al-Katheri, "Women in Hadramawt Organize to Alleviate Travel Restrictions, Providing a Model for Civic Engagement," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 13, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16051>

^[26] Interview with Azal al-Ariqi, Director of Basma Foundation for Women and Child Development, March 2024.

^[27] The Community Peace Authority is primarily focused on conflict resolution and peacebuilding through mediating disputes and fostering social cohesion, with a particular emphasis on women's and community concerns.

^[28] Al-Amal Foundation's main goal is to solve disputes, with a particular focus on supporting women.

^[29] Her Highness is a media platform for Hadrami communities that helps form a strong link between society and women, highlighting issues related to women and families, and finding innovative ways to address them. The platform also highlights survival stories of female victims of violence.

^[30] Politics and My Right to Participate is a network dedicated to the active participation of women, enhancing their status within the community and boosting their confidence and achievements.

^[31] Interview with Dhiya Saleh Eidh al-Owaini, Lawyer and Legal Affairs Department Officer, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs office in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[32] Ibid.

Such networks assisted Al-Owaini in breaking through in ways she had not anticipated, although she noted they are still in dire need of further support. Reflecting on her own experience joining the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU), and the difficulties she experienced in reaching out to them, she described how such organizations are not easily accessible, not well-supported, nor promoted or structured enough to ensure that women who stand to benefit the most actually do so. Enhancing these organizations' reach, capacity, and impact to support women's economic empowerment, she emphasized, cannot be overstated. This is particularly important given how women's networks offer an important launchpad for women starting a career, including female entrepreneurs.

Mona Ba'aghtian, a young Hadrami entrepreneur and director of the Al-Amal Center for Entrepreneurship, relied on a women's network to help her start her own company. She attributes much of her entrepreneurial success to the support from the Amal Women's Socio-Cultural Foundation. "The foundation's workshops on small businesses, management, and leadership skills were crucial in launching my company," said Baghtian.^[33] Through conferences, workshops, and volunteering activities provided by these groups, she forged valuable friendships and professional connections. Additionally, wider networking opportunities, including mixed-gender and international ones, enabled her to find information on job and training opportunities, gain support from peers in her field, and promote her business.

Social media platforms are increasingly being used for networking purposes in Yemen. Huda Amin Jouban, a health professional, spoke about how useful she found her informal network of friends and social media platforms, noting that these included both internal groups affiliated with her organization and external ones, ranging from scientific and research circles to volunteering and personal interests, many of which were formed via Facebook or WhatsApp.^[34] These platforms helped her connect with researchers and mentors, supported her events and workshops, and eventually led her to establish a research center, the Biozone Center for Studies and Research.

Networks were also said to boost women's confidence by encouraging them to assume leadership roles. An educator said "networking within the educational sector opened up opportunities for leadership that I had not considered before."^[35] It increased her visibility and eventually led her to become the deputy director of a school. For others, networking led to career paths they might not have envisaged. "I did not think about entering the field of media, as I majored in Islamic studies, so [after graduating] I went to work in my specialty [education] at a school. Through networking opportunities offered at Al-Amal Foundation, I discovered my talent in design and montage. Many female media professionals approached me to edit their media materials. Then I started reading voice-overs [and so on]."^[36]

^[33] Interview with Mona Ba'aghtian, Director of the Al-Amal Center for Entrepreneurship (affiliated with the Al-Amal Women's Foundation) in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[34] Interview with Huda Amin Jouban, a health professional in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[35] Interview with an educator in the kindergarten sector in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[36] Interview with a media officer and administrator in a school, Hadramawt, March 2024.

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of mentorship and how networks facilitated important relationships between women. mentorship programs, Chairperson of Al-Amal Women's Socio-Cultural Foundation, has provided extensive business mentorship and trained over 350 volunteers in leadership and management skills, many of which got leadership and managerial roles after that. Speaking about a young volunteer that she took under her wing and trained extensively since high school, she recounted how the young woman went on to apply for a managerial role at the Chamber of Commerce in Hadramawt: "Despite her limited experience outside our volunteer group, I encouraged her to apply confidently. During her interview, her connection to Al-Amal Women's volunteers was recognized [...] my endorsement through our network helped her secure the job immediately after graduation, leading to a three-year tenure before advancing to a higher position, a testament to the value placed on our network by the Chamber of Commerce," said Ba'awaidhan.^[37]

Women's networks were also said to play a vital role in reinforcing community leadership. Ba'awaidhan said networking has reinforced her role as a community leader and fostered a supportive community for other women entrepreneurs.^[38] Another said that leveraging women's networks enabled her to advocate for broader educational changes that have benefited her community and transformed the approach to schooling, demonstrating how networks empower women to effect community-wide impact.^[39]

^[37] Interview with Abha Ba'awaidhan, Chairperson of Al-Amal Women's Socio-Cultural Foundation and member of the Supervisory Committee of the Hadramawt Women for Peace, and the Women's Development Coalition for Peace in Hadramawt, April 2024.

^[38] Ibid.

^[39] Interview with an educational director in Hadramawt, March 2024.

3. Systemic Challenges Facing Women's Groups and Organizations

While the benefits of women's networks are many and extend beyond those outlined above, many of these organizations face serious structural barriers. Although there are numerous groups focused on women's rights and empowerment, women's networks in specialized fields like law, medicine, and academia are conspicuously absent, mirroring the small number of women in these professions across Hadramawt. Attributing the absence of women in these fields to the conservative nature and patriarchal structure of Hadramawt, however, fails to capture more nuanced complexities at play. Many of the interviewees, who were cognizant and generally accepting of the conservative nature of Hadramawt, noted how educating girls is now a priority for many Hadrami families. This was attributed partly to the socialist legacy in Hadramawt, in addition to the exposure and influence of many families immigrating to Africa and other parts of the world for trade. Outside the capital Mukalla, however, opportunities for women to enter such fields are scarce.

Many women's networks grapple with budget limitations that restrict their ability to conduct research and implement desired activities effectively. Online support, while valuable, predominantly offers informational assistance rather than the crucial financial or logistical aid needed to enhance professional advancement. Furthermore, electricity outages and slow internet hinders women's online networking opportunities.

Some organizations headed by women in Hadramawt have been targeted by local officials and faced legal and administrative hurdles imposed by governmental bodies that systematically undermine their capacity to support women effectively. The experiences of two female leaders of organizations focused on women's development and social welfare illustrate the pervasiveness of unjustified interference, including the withdrawal of institutional support and challenges over property rights. For instance, one organization was challenged by local authorities over the ownership of its building despite clear documentation and significant personal investment.^[40] Another encountered severe bureaucratic obstacles that hindered its operations and training programs, affecting over 400 women beneficiaries.^[41] These instances reflect a broader pattern where local officials seek to marginalize and actively suppress women-led initiatives, undermining efforts toward more gender equality.

The lack of robust legal protections and effective advocacy mechanisms further compounds these challenges. Hadramawt's legal and political system, noted some respondents, is largely influenced by patriarchal norms, leading to biased decisions

^[40] Interview with female leader of a local organization focused on women's development and social welfare in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[41] Interview with Director General of a Youth Support Fund, March 2024.

and inadequate enforcement of protective laws. A respondent, talking about the bias she faced and the continued legal battles faced by her organization, noted how even the “judicial outcomes seemed influenced by higher political connections, demonstrating systemic bias against women-led organizations.”^[42]

Employing strategies that can safeguard women's organizations and their networks thus becomes paramount. In tandem, it is important to recognize that many of these challenges stem from gender-based violence (GBV), which has been on the increase since the war and many of the women interviewed for this paper have been subjected.

3.1 Forms of Gender-Based Violence

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Interviewees for this research, especially those in leadership positions, reported frequent online harassment, including unsolicited negative comments, personal attacks, and trolling. Solaf al-Hanashi, the Director General of the Youth Support Fund, shared distressing experiences with online harassment, noting a significant increase as her involvement in community initiatives grew. It escalated from critical comments on social media to personal attacks questioning her integrity and commitment to community values.^[43] Similarly, Ba'aghtian described how expanding her business online exposed her to various forms of harassment, which affected her personal and professional life. A social media expert who volunteers with a women's organization said, “When I started promoting my business on social media, I was not prepared for the barrage of inappropriate comments and outright sexist remarks. This experience forced me to reconsider how and where I promote my business online.”^[44] Her public persona made her a frequent target of online harassment, which included comments that crossed into personal abuse.

Threats and Intimidation: Some of the women interviewed reported receiving direct threats to their safety and well-being, which often aimed to intimidate and discourage them from continuing their public or professional activities. An educator, who leads a psychological support group for girls and women, explained how her role exposed her to direct threats, particularly when addressing sensitive issues that challenge local norms. “The work we do at the support group sometimes challenges deeply entrenched societal norms, which has led to direct threats against me and my team,” she noted.^[45] Al-Hanashi shared how threats targeted her initiatives aimed at empowering youth, especially women, putting her in the spotlight and leading to intimidation attempts to make her step down or scale back her efforts.^[46] Entrepreneur Mona Ahmed Ba'aghtian reportedly faced threats extending beyond personal attacks to include tactics aimed at disrupting her business operations.^[47]

^[42] Interview with a female leader of a local foundation that focuses on community and women's development, March 2024.

^[43] Interview with Solaf al-Hanashi, Director General of the Youth Support Fund, March 2024.

^[44] Interview with a social media designer, Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[45] Interview with an educator and volunteer with a women's organization, Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[46] Interview with Solaf al-Hanashi, Director General of the Youth Support Fund, March 2024.

^[47] Interview with Mona Ba'aghtian, Director of the Al-Amal Center for Entrepreneurship (affiliated with the Al-Amal Women's Foundation) in Hadramawt, March 2024.

Cyber Sexual Harassment: The interviews revealed distressing experiences with cyber sexual harassment, including unsolicited sexual advances, inappropriate content, and privacy violations. A respondent shared her experiences with receiving inappropriate messages and images, noting how “being in the public eye as a media personality, I’ve unfortunately faced my share of cyber sexual harassment. This ranged from unsolicited explicit messages to inappropriate comments on public posts. It reached a point where I had to rethink my online engagement strategies and tighten my privacy settings to protect myself.”^[48] A leader who works in the educational sector discussed how her personal photos and contact details were distributed without her consent, causing significant personal and professional repercussions.^[49]

Defamation and Biased Attacks: Defamation campaigns are on the increase, particularly for those in visible roles requiring a strong public image. Arwa Abdullah Omar, a deputy dean at a university, faced defamation attempts aimed at discrediting her leadership and academic contributions when she initiated changes in academic programs to include more diverse perspectives.^[50] A media officer said her business reputation was damaged by competitors who posted slanderous comments online. Her rumored financial management practices were maliciously spread, impacting her professional relationships and career progress.^[51]

Discrimination: Gender-based discrimination undermines women's ability to fully engage with their work and social networks. The lack of opportunity and time for women to build networks was a hurdle reported by many women interviewed, lamenting that opportunities often arise at moments when women cannot participate. For instance, important networks and connections are mostly formed in qat gatherings, posing a barrier for female leaders in Hadramawt, where cultural norms deem it shameful for women to participate in qat chewing sessions. This restriction not only excludes women from crucial networking opportunities but also limits their visibility in influential gatherings where key decisions are made.

^[48] Interview with a women's rights activist, March 2024.

^[49] Interview with an educator, March 2024.

^[50] Interview with Arwa Abdullah Omar, deputy dean of a higher education institution in Hadramawt, March 2024.

^[51] Interview with a media center officer, March 2024.

4. Conclusion

Testimonies of women interviewed for the purpose of this policy brief highlighted the importance of women's professional groups and networks for Hadrami women's public participation and access to resources for career advancement and leadership roles. By participating in networks, which include members from different regions, socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, and with varied professional experience, women can access a wider range of support, opportunities, and information that might otherwise be inaccessible. These networks bridge public participation gaps for women, fostering resilience and enabling women to "get ahead" rather than just "get by," through leveraging their wider social networks to gain influence and recognition beyond their immediate community.

Additionally, women's networks serve as platforms for collective action. Women in Hadramawt use solidarity and strength to advocate for social change and challenge discriminatory practices and policies. Through collective advocacy, they work toward altering the structural conditions that limit women's roles in society, striving for reforms that will ensure better representation and rights for women across various sectors.

The manifold benefits and advantages of women's networks were amply illustrated in this brief, but the challenges they face demand urgent attention. Many of these women's organizations and networks aren't accessible, well-supported, promoted, or structured enough to ensure that women who stand to benefit the most are able to take advantage of them. The importance of enhancing existing institutions' reach, capacity, and impact to support women's economic empowerment cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the increase in GBV since the war has hindered these platforms, as have entrenched patriarchal norms and conservative cultural constraints, which significantly limit women's full participation in different professional groups and networks, as well as broader economic participation. The resilience and the strategies women continue to employ to navigate myriad challenges also underscore the urgent need for stronger legal protections, supportive structures, and societal change to empower women fully in professional and public domains in Hadramawt.

Within this, women's professional groups and networks play a dual role— a shield against socio-economic challenges; and a ladder to greater empowerment and community development. As such, it remains fundamental for all involved—community leaders, policymakers, and global partners—to remain engaged and proactive in promoting, supporting, and leveraging these networks for empowering women and strengthening their economic participation.

5. Recommendations

To Professional Women's Groups and Civil Society Organizations

- Empower existing networks that cultivate women's leadership skills and that focus on industry-specific knowledge, opportunities, and resources including logistical, financial, and knowledge support.
- Launch programs linking female high schoolers, university students, and graduates with experienced female professionals and leaders, fostering collaboration and mentorship.
- Use networks for campaigns that raise awareness on the significance of women's roles in social and economic development in Yemen, and that advocate for policy change and equal working opportunities for women in Hadramawt.
- Initiate programs that engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and changing harmful perceptions of working women.
- Establish secure digital platforms for Yemeni women professionals to exchange ideas, seek advice, promote mentorship, ensuring accessibility even in remote areas.
- Collaborate with global cyber security experts and engage in joint research and developmental projects to address specific cyber threats targeting women in public spaces.
- Launch campaigns to educate working women on cyber safety and GBV's impacts, engage men and boys in support of women's online safety, and promote inclusive community dialogues on GBV.
- Host workshops on legal rights and dispute resolution, equipping professional women's groups, CSOs, and NGOs to handle government interference and defend their public participation.
- Maintain comprehensive records of interactions with government and stakeholders to ensure transparency and provide evidence for disputes or legal issues.
- Collaborate with local authorities to align network activities with regional gender initiatives.

To Development Partners:

- Equip grassroots women's professional groups with the tools and strategies for establishing well-structured professional networks with increased outreach programs for women in Hadramawt.
- Support professional women networks in creating secure digital platforms that are accessible even in remote areas.

- Provide logistical and financial assistance to organizations focused on women's rights, women's economic participation, gender-based violence prevention, and leadership development.
- Enhance women's financial independence through programs that increase financial literacy, enhance business skills, promote entrepreneurship, and provide access to microfinance.^[52]
- Secure funding for advanced security technologies and support local tech solutions that protect women online.
- Allocate funds to build online networks for professional women to share experiences and access support for navigating cyber threats.
- Support the development of local networks that provide resources and support to women, including mentorship and collaborative platforms.
- Develop robust training programs for professional women's groups and networks on digital literacy and privacy management, and form international partnerships for knowledge exchange on digital security.
- Monitor the situation of NGOs and civil society in Yemen, report violations and challenges they face to international bodies, and publish findings to raise awareness and prompt action.

To Local Authorities:

- Initiate widespread campaigns to change gender stereotypes and societal attitudes, promoting the acceptance of women in public and professional roles, dismantling wrong and harmful perceptions such as women's employment taking away male job opportunities.
- Collaborate with professional women's groups and CSOs to establish programs that engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and changing harmful perceptions of working women.
- Collaborate with community leaders, supportive religious figures, and influencers to promote women's rights and women's economic participation, leveraging their influence to shift cultural norms.
- Provide logistical and financial assistance to organizations focused on women's rights, gender-based violence prevention, as well as career and leadership development.
- Enhance women's economic empowerment and mobility through programs that promote entrepreneurship and provide access to microfinance.^[53]
- Protect civil society operations from undue political and personal interference, and establish an independent oversight body.

^[52] "Every Day Brings a New Livelihood: Women's Economic Empowerment in Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 31, 2024, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/23122>

^[53] Ibid.

To Lawmakers:

- Enhance legal protections for professional women's groups, NGOs and civil society organizations, ensuring they can operate without fear of undue interference. Fast-track legal processes for organizations facing unjust actions from governmental bodies.
- Develop and enforce anti-discrimination and GBV laws, and establish specialized police and judiciary units to handle GBV cases sensitively.
- Monitor the adherence of local officials to legal standards and enforce penalties for violations that involve corruption or abuse of power, especially those impacting women's groups, civil rights and community development.
- Provide material support and solidarity for NGOs facing challenges, including legal assistance, international exposure, and financial aid to bolster their resilience against unjust local governmental actions.
- Enact comprehensive GBV legislation and establish specialized support units for timely and sensitive case handling.
- Implement accountability mechanisms within organizations to ensure GBV incidents are properly addressed and justice is served for victims.

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