



WOMEN'S VOICES IN YEMEN'S PEACE PROCESS:

Priorities, Recommendations, and
Mechanisms for Effective Inclusion

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Cover photo: A woman walks in Aden on February 22, 2022 // Sana'a Center
photo by Sam Tarling



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To address the marginalization of women from the formal peace negotiations, 15 Yemeni women, from different governorates in Yemen and leaders in their respective fields, were invited to participate in a workshop in Amman between September 18-20, 2022. Among the participants were economists, bankers, activists, academics, legal experts, and political representatives. The workshop was an opportunity to discuss and share key challenges being faced by women in engaging with the peace process and propose mechanisms for a more effective and inclusive approach to peacebuilding in Yemen.

Drawing on their experience engaging with the UN-backed peace process, participants highlighted the pressing need to prioritize economic recovery, given the devastating impact of economic collapse on Yemenis, women included. At the political level, they highlighted the need to support the Presidential Leadership Council and relevant bodies in restoring state institutions, and for adherence to the 30 percent minimum quota for women in governing bodies negotiated during Yemen's National Dialogue Conference. They also urged the de-facto authorities in Sana'a to put an end to increasingly restrictive measures that infringe on women's freedom of mobility and speech. Participants highlighted the need to localize the peace process, being mindful of Yemen's culture and specificity, and to work hand-in-hand with civil society, as pledged during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Eight years since the start of the conflict in Yemen, and with no sign of a peace settlement on the horizon, the formal peace track continues to be largely confined to the internationally recognized government, Houthi authorities, and other warring factions.^[1] The process excludes other critical actors in Yemen, not least women. To date, Yemeni women have had little to no representation in the most crucial peace negotiations that have taken place on Yemen, an approach that stands in stark contradiction with the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, specifically UNSCR 1325, which urges all parties to include women in peacebuilding initiatives.

The marked absence of women in Yemen's formal peace process has drawn criticism from Yemeni stakeholders and observers alike. Yemeni women have been at the forefront of mitigating the impact of the war by building peace on the ground, protecting vulnerable groups, and alleviating their communities' suffering. Local women's groups and peace activists have played a critical role in diffusing conflict by mobilizing their constituencies, cooperating with community leaders, and negotiating with different warring factions to end violence.^[2] Their voices, however, continue to be ignored in formal peacebuilding processes, and calls for their inclusion have fallen on deaf ears.

To address this lack of inclusivity and marginalization, 15 Yemeni women from diverse backgrounds (primarily in economics, politics, and civil society) and different governorates (Sana'a, Taiz, Hadramawt, and Aden) convened in Amman for a workshop conducted from September 18-20, 2022. Organized by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies in collaboration with the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), the workshop provided an opportunity for Yemeni women to identify existing gaps and priorities, and discuss mechanisms for an effective and inclusive peace process.

^[1] "UN calls for inclusion of women in Yemen peace talks," MEMO Middle East Monitor, October 30, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201030-un-calls-for-inclusion-of-women-in-yemen-peace-talks/>

^[2] Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf

AN OVERVIEW OF YEMEN'S PEACE PROCESS AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

In his opening remarks on the 5th Feminist Summit in December 2022, which virtually brought together political and civil society actors from across Yemen, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg noted a steady decline in the already limited number of Yemeni women participating in peace efforts since 2015.^[3] No women representatives were present at the Riyadh Agreement negotiations in 2019 or at the talks that led to a ceasefire agreement between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the internationally recognized government in June 2020.^[4] At the UN-led Stockholm Agreement negotiations held in Sweden in 2018, only 4 percent of the delegation were women, and these were negotiators, not mediators. The highest representation of women was in 2016, during the Kuwait peace talks, where women accounted for 12 percent of the delegates present. None of the female delegates, however, were from the Houthi delegation.^[5] The limited participation of women in formal peace negotiations only tells half the story. Overall, women's needs and input have been overlooked by both the warring parties and the international community. The fact that many women inside Yemen do not speak English and lack easy access to the donor community makes it more difficult for their voices and perspectives to be heard.^[6]

The engagement of women with Yemen's peace process has so far been limited to Track II and Track III talks. In Track II initiatives, informal consultations are held between non-state actors such as civil society organizations (CSOs), youth movements, religious groups, trade unions, and women-led organizations, among others. Track II actors, however, wield no political power to influence the peace negotiations; this ultimately lies in the hands of actors engaged in official Track I talks.^[7] Women are also engaged in Track III work, which focuses on peacebuilding at the grassroots level, working with community-based organizations, community leaders, and other local actors. Despite the commendable work being carried out on the ground, research suggests that women working at the grassroots level lack the networks needed to reach a broader section of Yemeni society and play a more influential role in the peace process. They also find it difficult to connect with actors engaged in Track I and Track II processes.^[8]

^[3] "Special Envoy Opening Remarks on the 5th Feminist Summit," OSESGY, December 11, 2022, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/special-envoy-opening-remarks-5th-feminist-summit>

^[4] "Women's Participation in Peace Processes," 2022, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/explore-the-data>

^[5] Ibid.

^[6] Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf

^[7] Some women have observed that even within Track II initiatives, women's engagement is limited, and have reported that their recommendations and outputs are largely disregarded by mediators and Track I actors. See, Hadil al-Mowafak, "Engaging Women in Yemen's Peace Process Requires Better Alliances," Yemen Policy Center, October 4, 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/engaging-women-in-yemens-peace-process-requires-better-alliances-and-networks/>

^[8] Ibid.

There have been efforts by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OESGY) to ensure greater inclusivity in ceasefire negotiations. The Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security (Tawafuq), for example, is a consultative mechanism that was created in collaboration with OESGY and UN Women in October 2015. Consisting of 60 women with diverse expertise, the aim of the organization is to empower women, strengthen their participation in peacebuilding, and find a sustainable solution to the conflict in Yemen.^[9] OESGY, UN Women, and Tawafuq also established the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which brought together eight Yemeni women and was consulted during talks that led to the Stockholm Agreement in 2018.^[10] The lack of transparency and credibility in how such networks were formed, however, and specifically which organizations and women were chosen, has drawn criticism among Yemeni women active in peacebuilding,^[11] and was a sentiment echoed during the Amman workshop.

Along with the groups created in collaboration with the OESGY and UN Women, newly formed voluntary initiatives between women's groups have surfaced since the outbreak of the war, an important development in collective action among women. These are also unique because of their inclusive nature, involving women representatives from different regions, political affiliations, and backgrounds, as well as affiliates of parties to the the conflict. The shift from standalone activists to alliances^[12] points to the resilience of female activists in Yemen. Underground safety networks have also been established to protect those who engage in activism and those escaping familial, societal, and institutional abuse.^[13]

In response to the increase in women's networks in Yemen, OESGY, in collaboration with UN Women, also established an entity called the "Group of Nine."^[14] Founded in 2018, it brings together a network of women's organizations working on peacebuilding in Yemen. The group acts as a focal point for Yemeni women's groups to network, collaborate, create alliances, and propose a shared agenda for the peace process. Regrettably, not all women's groups or organizations are represented in this coalition, and many important ones, who are carrying out admirable work within their communities, are not being given the opportunity to participate in forums that have a direct line of communication with OESGY. Long-term funding and training are required to support these groups to work within and across coalitions, enhance coordination, create entry points for participation in the peace process, and be able to propose a shared agenda. There is also a need to establish clear channels of communication between women's groups involved in Track II and Track III initiatives in order to strengthen participation and representation among them, and enhance the dissemination of knowledge and information across both tracks.

^[9] "Women, Peace and Security," OESGY, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/women-peace-and-security>

^[10] In preparation for the Geneva peace talks that began in September 2018, the newly recruited TAG members were asked to prepare discussion papers on topics assigned to them, in line with their experience and expertise. See, Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf

^[11] Ibid.

^[12] Fatima Mutaheer, "Yemen's New Networks in Women's Peacebuilding," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. October 15, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15282>

^[13] In Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, the work of women-focused CSOs has been reduced substantially due to harassment and threats from Houthi authorities. See, "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>; Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Yemeni women activists escape war with the help of a global, underground network," GlobalPost, July 29, 2019, <https://theworld.org/stories/2019-07-29/yemeni-women-activists-escape-war-help-global-underground-network>

^[14] Groups represented in the Group of Nine: Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, the Feminist Summit, Peace Partners Alliance, Marib Girls' Foundation (Peace Makers), Youth Leadership Foundation (the Youth Consultative Council), Southern Women for Peace, Women's Voices for Peace, Women for Yemen Network, and Youth Awareness Platform.

GAPS HINDERING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN YEMEN'S PEACE PROCESS

In addition to the need for better communication between Track II and Track III initiatives, the critical issue remains that women are ultimately excluded from Track I talks altogether, an absence that continues to be a matter of grave concern. Workshop participants noted how gaps in the approach of UN organizations and other relevant international organizations responsible for the implementation of the WPS agenda are doing little to ensure more meaningful participation for women in the peace process at a time when women are facing increasingly repressive measures in Yemen. Below is a summary of the main challenges outlined by Yemeni women from various economic, political, and civil society realms, based on their experience engaging with the UN-backed peace process.

Approaches are not contextual and fail to include women

The consensus among women participating in the workshop was that the approach of the UN-backed peace process in Yemen does not correspond to realities on the ground, which has hindered its effectiveness. They noted clear shortcomings when it came to fair and meaningful participation of women in Yemen's peace negotiations. Back in 2013-14, during the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), women had negotiated a 30 percent quota in elected bodies and governmental institutions. Since the start of the conflict, however, women have been almost entirely marginalized from the formal peace process, with their participation limited to Track II and Track III talks, where women, along with civil society actors, are relegated to an advisory role.

Gaps in gender expertise on Yemen

With the WPS agenda in place, Yemeni women had hoped for support from the UN and the international community for their demands to be included in mediation and peacebuilding negotiations. To advance the WPS agenda and help foster a more inclusive process, the OSESGY has appointed different gender advisors since 2015, but participants said there are gaps in the advisors' understanding of women's challenges in Yemen, which has had a negative impact on the type of projects being supported.^[15] Information gaps between OSESGY's Women's Advisory Board and the local community are also evident, said the participants, and the absence of a regulatory framework for the Women's Advisory Board negatively impacts the effectiveness of its work.

^[15] A 2021 study reviewing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Yemen notes a lack of a strategic plan from the international community and a tendency to not coordinate activities, which causes an overlap of initiatives. See Joke Buringa, "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.p

Short-term initiatives and inadequate studies

Yemeni women attending the workshop said that international support, both financial and in terms of capacity building, has been decreasing over the years. They added that support specifically for women peacebuilders and their protection remains limited and short-term, hindering the overall impact and sustainability of initiatives. Compounding this, international research, studies, and policy papers fall short of reflecting women's priorities and are sometimes dismissive of local knowledge. The war in Yemen has deepened regional and sectarian fault lines in an unprecedented way; participants stressed that more efforts need to be focused on studies that examine social issues that have emerged in Yemeni society because of the war and potential avenues for restoring peace and alleviating societal tensions.

Lack of protection for women working in peacebuilding

At the local level, women have demonstrated a high level of engagement and skill in peacebuilding and mediation,^[16] but their almost non-existent representation in the government makes it challenging for women to wield influence through formal channels. The few women involved in high-level political circles are confronted with structural barriers and inequalities intrinsic to Yemeni society. Against this backdrop, women involved in peacekeeping initiatives face additional structural and social challenges that undermine the significance and influence of women in peace processes. In Houthi-controlled areas, where systematic policies to limit women's public role in society are being installed, women peacebuilders are often undermined. Some face direct threats, on the pretense that they are serving Western agendas in what the Houthi authorities refer to as a 'soft war'^[17] against their cultural identity. Such forms of intimidation are not restricted to Houthi-held areas; similar challenges were also voiced by workshop participants from Aden, who reported material extortion, harassment, bargaining over political affiliations, and exclusion based on regional, gender, or political affiliation in areas nominally under the control of the internationally recognized government.

^[16] The role of women as mediators is well-known in Yemen, especially among tribes. See Rim Mugahed, Bilqees Al-Lahbi, Magnus Fitz, "Women's Non-Traditional Roles in Tribal Societies," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 27, 2022, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Women_Non_Traditional_Roles_in_Tribal_Societies_en.pdf

^[17] In a public statement by Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, the "soft war" was referenced as "a cultural attack against Yemeni society with diverse influences and negative factors." According to Al-Houthi, "soft war is a complex concept that manifests itself through an attack on the faithful, in order to deprive them of their principles and deviate them from their identity and morals of religion, so the cultural war is the same as the soft war." Excerpt from a public speech by Abdelmalek al-Houthi delivered on December 20, 2019, entitled "The Faith in Yemen." "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014," UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, September 29, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A-HRC-45-CRP7-en.pdf>



Yemeni women discuss priorities in the peace process during a workshop in Amman on September 18, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON PRIORITIES FOR YEMEN AND ITS PEACEBUILDING AGENDA

Below is a summary of the priorities identified by Yemeni women for a more effective and inclusive peacebuilding process in three fields: economic, political, and civic.

Priorities in the Economic Field

The war has had a destructive impact on the country's economy.^[18] Economic stability was cited by Yemeni women as a main priority for the peace process and in urgent need of address. Workshop participants, among whom were bankers and economists, noted how the UN-led peace framework has predominantly focused on a political settlement among conflict parties while neglecting the critical issue of economic power-sharing. The economic crisis has had a particularly devastating impact on women, who have been pushed into finding employment in order to meet basic needs; at the same time, they are being excluded from discussions on the economic track. Recent studies^[19] point to more women engaging in income-generation activity since the war, a shift that on the one hand represents a window of opportunity for women to enter the workforce, but on the other hand – in the absence of rule of law and with inadequate labor protection – risks women being left vulnerable to exploitation and

^[18] Yemen's GDP shrunk nearly 28 percent in 2015, 9.8 percent in 2016, and 5.9 percent in 2017. Over a third of businesses have closed and more than half of those open have scaled down. See, "Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen," UNDP, 2019, <https://yemen.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Assessing%20the%20Impact%20of%20War%20on%20Development%20in%20Yemen.pdf>

^[19] For a gender analysis of the impact of the crisis on Yemenis see, 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/publications/main-publications/8480>

unfair pay. To create decent job opportunities for all segments of society, and thereby partially alleviate the dire humanitarian situation, participants attending the workshop highlighted the following priorities:

A roadmap for economic recovery

Participants observed that ongoing UN-led peace efforts fall short of addressing the economic drivers of the conflict. The split of the Central Bank of Yemen between rival branches in Sana'a and Aden has led to conflicting monetary policies.^[20] The price of basic goods has skyrocketed, and in Houthi-controlled areas, public salaries haven't been paid regularly in years. Fuel prices have soared and shortages have become more common as a result of tensions between Houthi authorities and the government over imports to the Red Sea port of Hodaydah.^[21] In response to the above challenges, a roadmap for economic recovery was proposed by Yemeni women, which would need to prioritize the unification of the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) and the country's monetary policy. The attendees also stressed the need to facilitate bank transfers and transactions and provide support to the banking sector. The unification of the exchange rate, they suggested, should be conducted in phases, and the transfer of liquidity, internally and externally, should go through a joint committee under the UN's supervision. Participants stressed the need to ensure the transparent exchange of financial data and information between the two central banks, Sana'a and Aden, to enhance confidence in a way that serves financial consolidation.

Repairing and investing in infrastructure

Within the roadmap of economic recovery, participants highlighted the need to focus on rebuilding infrastructure. The destruction of Yemen's infrastructure is one of the most visible effects of its war. A 2018 survey found that local water and electric infrastructure has been severely damaged and that over 40 percent of health and education infrastructure and over 30 percent of roads were damaged.^[22]

Integrating women in economic development

Since the war began, women have taken on new roles and responsibilities in the economy. Women have increasingly started new enterprises, often home-based businesses, or entered professions that were previously dominated by men.^[23] The humanitarian response has also created new employment opportunities for women, and some have been employed in security forces for parties to the conflict. As an increasing number of women enter the workforce, some secure fulfilling jobs or open successful businesses, but many others are pushed into low-paid, informal physical labor, such as domestic work, while others have resorted to begging.^[24] Future economic strategies must consider the changing role of women's participation in the workforce and include their perspectives in the peace process.

^[20] In Houthi-controlled areas, only prewar banknotes are in use, while in parts of the country under the government's nominal control, new bills printed since 2016 are prevalent. See Rafat al-Akhali, "Yemen's Most Pressing Problem Isn't War. It's the Economy," *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/08/yemen-crisis-war-economy-conflict-humanitarian-response/>

^[21] *Ibid.*

^[22] Tom Lambert and AFAR Consulting, "Yemen Multi Sector Early Recovery Assessment," EECR Cluster Yemen, 2018 as cited in "Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen," UNDP, 2019, <https://yemen.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Assessing%20the%20Impact%20of%20War%20on%20Development%20in%20Yemen.pdf>

^[23] 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/publications/main-publications/8480>

^[24] *Ibid.*

Supporting programs that invest in local communities: fishing and the agricultural sector

Two sectors identified by participants as in urgent need of support were the fishing sector and the agricultural sector, both of which represent economic pillars integral to the livelihood of Yemenis. Both sectors have been severely impacted by the war. The fisheries industry has witnessed several challenges, including a drop in the level of production due to the displacement of many fishermen and the associated workforce; fish processing plants halting production; surging fuel costs; the decline of local purchasing power leading to a drop in the local demand for fish products; and the disempowerment of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Fisheries Wealth, among other challenges.^[25] Similarly, agricultural production has declined significantly since the war. Agricultural land has been abandoned as farmers have been displaced, crops and fields willfully destroyed, and as fuel shortages have increased production and transportation costs.^[26]

Priorities in the Political Field

The biggest political obstacle identified by participants was the integration of competing powers into a national and unified political landscape. Participants echoed the need to prioritize the formation of a legitimate political system that represents the needs of all women and men. In April 2022, an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) was formed to replace President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, composed of different parties within the internationally recognized government, but discord and fragmentation threaten its work. In northern Yemen, Houthi authorities continue to consolidate their political ideology whilst tightening restrictions on women's mobility and freedom of speech, most palpably through requiring the approval of a male guardian, or mahram, for all manner of activities. The following political priorities were highlighted by workshop participants.

Supporting the PLC in restoring state institutions

Participants noted a number of obstacles inhibiting the work of the PLC, including political fragmentation related to the chain of command in the military and security forces, declining state revenue streams, and fragmentation of currency exchange systems. Participants urged international actors – particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the countries that pushed for the PLC's creation – to support efforts aimed at achieving consensus in political and military decisions within the PLC and to clearly distribute duties among its members. Participants also proposed the formation of a mediation committee, overseen by the UN and Gulf Cooperation Council, to monitor and ensure consensus among PLC members in the administration of military, security, and political affairs.

^[25] Rethinking Yemen's Economy, "Developing Yemen's Fishing Industry," April 1, 2020, https://devchampions.org/uploads/publications/files/Rethinking_Yemens_Economy-policy_brief_19_en.pdf

^[26] "Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen," UNDP, 2019, <https://yemen.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Assessing%20the%20Impact%20of%20War%20on%20Development%20in%20Yemen.pdf>

Activating legal bodies and applying a quota for women in governmental bodies

To support the PLC and work to unify the objectives of the various national forces and components, a Consultation and Reconciliation Commission was formed on April 7, 2022. The commission is made up of 50 members from different political stripes, with its five-member executive including one woman.^[27] The commission is tasked with unifying the goals and visions of the PLC in restoring state institutions. Workshop participants highlighted the need to activate the commission to support the work of the PLC and promote greater participation for women in peace negotiations. A gender quota of 30 percent in governmental bodies, agreed at the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference, has been systematically ignored, despite efforts by female activists and other civil society groups to promote the inclusion of women and gender perspectives in the peace process.

Ending restrictions on women's mobility and speech

Houthi authorities have put many regulations in place that limit women's movement and engagement in the public sphere, most notably a ban on women traveling without the presence of a male guardian. This includes Yemeni women working for international organizations, who have been prevented from traveling outside their home governorates and so find themselves shut out of valuable training programs or unable to perform their jobs. Even in urban Sana'a, women have reportedly been prevented from leaving their homes in the evening, and women drivers are harassed at checkpoints with threats to revoke their licenses.^[28] Activists who are working for women's rights and in the field of peacekeeping are also facing defamation campaigns aimed at intimidating them and can face punitive consequences, including imprisonment. Such intimidation is also prevalent in areas under the nominal control of the internationally recognized government.

Priorities for Civil Society

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a critical role in providing social security and stability networks and preserving the cohesion of Yemen's social fabric. At the grassroots level, community-based women's organizations have worked relentlessly to alleviate the burden of their communities by providing humanitarian support and engaging in conflict mediation. However, CSOs face several challenges. Many are in dire need of modest financial and technical support and are ill-equipped to meet the detailed bureaucratic demands required by donors for even small grants.^[29] CSOs are facing increasing challenges and restrictions on their operational frameworks, with ones whose work focuses on peacebuilding and supporting the peace process particularly vulnerable to intimidation.^[30]

^[27] Jamila Ali Raja has served for 30 years with the Yemeni government as a representative and advisor in the diplomatic corps, as well as various ministries. She is also a prominent mediator and was a member of Yemen's National Dialogue Conference in 2013-14. Editor's Note: Raja is a member of the Sana'a Center's Advisory Board.

^[28] "The Sana'a Center Editorial – Women's Rights are Non-Negotiable," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 18, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/september-2022/18922>

^[29] Joke Buringa "Strategizing Beyond the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 23, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Strategizing_beyond_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_in_Yemen_en.pdf

^[30] For a summary of civil society work in Yemen see: Abdulkarim Qassim, Loay Amin, Mareike Transfeld, and Ewa Strzelecka, "The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO, May 4, 2020, <https://carpo-bonn.org/en/18-the-role-of-civil-society-in-peacebuilding-in-yemen/>

Localize the peacebuilding process

A central theme that emerged from the workshop was the need to localize the peacebuilding process, and for it to be driven by Yemenis in line with the needs of Yemeni society. This requires prioritizing Yemeni experts, working with CSOs and investing in enhancing their skills, and ensuring planning processes are designed and implemented by Yemenis for Yemenis. With donors having reduced their physical in-country presence, thus limiting their engagement with local actors, they have failed to meet their commitments to localization – as pledged in the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in May 2016.^[31] Participants stressed the need to pressure donors to abide by their commitments to work hand-in-hand with civil society. This would require international organizations to implement programs that serve the priorities of local communities, and to ensure that the bulk of the support goes to recovery, development, and reconstruction, moving away from an over-reliance on humanitarian work. Participants contend that important programs have taken a back seat and direly require support, including ones targeting education, health, people with special needs, and AIDS patients in Yemen.

Lifting restrictions on civil society organizations

In Houthi-controlled areas, civil society organizations are dealing with increasingly complex requirements to maintain registration and secure project approvals. They also need to secure permission from Houthi authorities to carry out some activities, including for staff travel within the country, or to organize training sessions or workshops. This is particularly the case with organizations working in the field of gender equality and women's rights. In areas that are under the control of the internationally recognized government, similar challenges are faced by CSOs, which are confronting complex registration and licensing procedures at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (OSAL) and Ministry of International Planning and Cooperation, as well as interference by various de facto authorities.^[32]

Condemning current restrictions on women

Restrictive measures imposed by Houthi authorities have had a detrimental effect on women working in CSOs in areas under the group's control. The requirement of gender-segregated training sessions and for a male guardian when traveling have derailed gains made by women in a sector that saw increased participation of women since the war. Despite clear violations of women's rights, there has been insufficient attention from the international community on repressive measures that risk removing women from public life.^[33] Participants urged the international community to demand that all parties lift restrictions imposed on the freedom of movement of women.

^[31] "The Grand Bargain," launched during the WHS in Istanbul in May 2016, is an agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organizations, who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

^[32] Abdulkarim Qassim, Loay Amin, Mareike Transfeld, and Ewa Strzelecka, "The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO, May 4, 2020, <https://carpo-bonn.org/en/18-the-role-of-civil-society-in-peacebuilding-in-yemen/>

^[33] "Sana'a Center Editorial – Women's Rights are Non-Negotiable," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 18, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/september-2022/18922>

CONCLUSION

To address the marginalization of women from the formal Track I peace negotiations, women leaders working in diverse sectors in Yemen were invited to participate in a workshop to amplify their voices and visions of peace. The workshop was an opportunity to discuss and share key challenges being faced by women and propose mechanisms for a more effective and inclusive approach to peacebuilding in Yemen. Eight years into the war, the approach of UN organizations and the international community responsible for implementing the WPS agenda continues to fall short in including women in Yemen's peace process, further marginalizing them at a time when they are facing increasingly repressive measures. Drawing on their experience engaging with the UN-backed peace process, participants highlighted the lack of contextual approaches that consider Yemen's culture and specificity, inadequate gender expertise, diminishing funds, and the focus on short-term initiatives as just some of the shortcomings in the approach of the UN and the international community.

When asked to outline their vision and priorities for peace in Yemen, participants prioritized the role of economic stability, noting how peace talks have predominantly focused on political aspects, neglecting the economy and the negotiation of economic power-sharing. Attendees proposed the development of a roadmap for economic recovery that focuses on supporting the Central Bank of Yemen in unifying its monetary policies, considers the perspectives of women in economic development, supports local communities whose livelihoods were worst hit during the war, and prioritizes the rebuilding of Yemen's infrastructure. At the political level, women highlighted the need to support the newly formed PLC and relevant legal bodies in restoring state institutions and in abiding by the 30 percent minimum quota for women in governing bodies negotiated during Yemen's NDC. They urged Houthi authorities to put an end to restrictive measures that infringe on women's freedom of mobility and speech.

By localizing the peace process in Yemen, participants want the international community to work hand-in-hand with civil society, which has been at the forefront of efforts to preserve the cohesion of Yemen's social fabric. But local CSOs are poorly funded, lack protection in an increasingly repressive environment, and face complex bureaucratic requirements to maintain their registration and secure project approvals.

The workshop concluded with recommendations to negotiating parties, both local and international, on key political, social, and economic provisions that need to be incorporated into Yemen's peace negotiations and agreements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations on Gender Inclusive Approaches to the UN-Backed Peace Process

To the International Community, OSESGY, and UN Women:

- Ensure the inclusion of women in ceasefire negotiations and agreements, and in follow-up and monitoring committees.
- Ensure women's consistent participation in all three peace tracks and in meetings held by the OSESGY, abiding by the 30 percent quota for women's representation negotiated at Yemen's NDC.
- Make public the selection process for women's networks involved in the peace process. The criteria for selection and candidacy should be inclusive, transparent, and clear, and allow for diverse geographical representation.
- Build the capacity of women's networks and coalitions by supporting their coordination, clarifying their roles across all three tracks, and commissioning studies that bridge the three tracks and integrate their respective efforts into the development of Yemen's peace agenda.
- Obligate local authorities handling statistical data on Yemen to make it public, so that future studies may use it to examine the socio-economic issues emerging from the war.
- Prioritize projects based on reliable and recent field studies and data, and that identify the needs and priorities of Yemenis at the grassroots level.

Economic Recommendations

To the International Community:

- Establish an economic department and team of experts within the OSESGY, supported by local and international economic experts.
- Establish a guiding framework for economic recovery in Yemen, to which regional and international donors and the government must commit. Within this roadmap, focus on investment and rebuilding Yemen's infrastructure.
- Ensure the inclusion of women's perspectives in economic development, taking into account the different economic roles adopted by women since the war.
- Support programs that invest in local communities, sectors that have been most affected by the war, and those that constitute primary livelihoods to Yemenis across geographic and political boundaries, with a focus on the fishing and agriculture sectors.

To Local Actors:

- Unify Yemen's fragmented monetary policy, facilitate transfers and banking transactions, and ensure that the banking sector remains neutral, transparent, and reliable given its critical role in the daily lives of Yemenis.

Political Recommendations**To the International Community:**

- Pressure the two main coalition parties (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) to oblige their local allies to reduce the level of tension and establish a mediation committee, overseen by the UN and Gulf Cooperation Council, to monitor and ensure consensus among PLC members in the administration of military, security, and political affairs.
- Put an end to the warring parties' monopolization of the peace agenda and adopt an intersectional approach that is sensitive to the needs of the broader Yemeni population, in particular the needs of women and civil society.
- Uphold the commitment of the UN to at least 30 percent female representation at the international level and in international missions.
- To Local Actors:
 - Convene the legislature on a permanent basis and adopt regulations governing newly-formed bodies, including the work of the PLC.
 - Enshrine the commitment of the government, PLC, and state institutions to the mechanisms and policies of international agreements, UN resolutions, and laws related to the representation of women.
 - Repeal policies and directives that impede women's movements and implement national mechanisms to monitor and criminalize campaigns of defamation that target women.
 - Adopt a political and social code of honor criminalizing and isolating those who incite or engage in campaigns against women.

Civil Society Recommendations**To the International Community:**

- Localize policies, programs, and aid by working hand-in-hand with local CSOs.
- Abide by the commitments to the outcomes of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which pledged to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.
- Consistent with the above, review unreasonable requests and unnecessary bureaucratic demands required by donors for minor grants.
- Reinstate and support national programs that have been abandoned, particularly those addressing education, health, people with special needs, and AIDS patients.

To Local Actors:

- Oblige all political parties in Yemen to stop imposing new regulations, procedures, policies, or laws that restrict the already limited space for civil society, and end interference in the work of local and international organizations.
- Oblige the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor to follow Yemen's legislative framework when issuing licenses for local and international organizations.

APPENDIX

Workshop Agenda and Scope

Amman, September 18-21, 2022

Between 18-20 September 2022, 15 Yemeni women, from different governorates in Yemen and leaders in their respective fields, were invited to participate in a workshop in Amman. Among the female participants were economists, bankers, activists, academics, legal experts, and political representatives. The workshop was an opportunity to amplify their voices and visions of peace, otherwise marginalized from formal peace negotiations. Specifically, the workshop aimed to identify the following:

1. Gaps at the local and international level that hinder women's inclusive and meaningful participation
2. Mechanisms for attaining women's fair and meaningful participation in peace talks and negotiations
3. Social, political, and economic priorities for peace in Yemen, and mechanisms for integrating priority areas into peace negotiations
4. Recommendations for integrating priority areas in future peace negotiations

Day 1

The workshop commenced with opening remarks by Rim Mugahed, a researcher with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and coordinator of the SAWT project (Supporting Women at the Arab Table). The day was split into two main sessions. In the first session, Bilqees Al-Lahbi, a researcher with the Sana'a Center, shared a summary of the workshop preparation process and its objectives, followed by an overview of the participation of women's groups and organizations in Yemen's peace process. The participants were then divided into three working groups to brainstorm and discuss the following question: Why are women and their visions of peace excluded from Yemen's peace process? Participants worked on identifying and presenting the existing challenges and gaps hindering women from participating in Yemen's peace process.

In the afternoon, the second session started with a discussion on current social, political, security, and economic priorities. Participants were asked to work within their respective working groups to identify key priorities in future peace negotiations and agreements. The outcomes of each working group were presented and discussed with all participants.

Day 2

The second day of the workshop focused on how to represent Yemen's priorities at negotiating tables. For the first half of the day, based on the outcomes of Day 1, the participants held extensive discussions on a number of questions:

- How can social, political, and economic priorities be reflected in future peace talks?
- What mechanisms can be used to facilitate their implementation?
- Who are the target parties?

In the second session, the outcomes of the discussions were drafted. This was followed by presentations and open discussions among the participants. For the final session of the day, working groups drafted recommendations and demands addressed to key actors, based on the identified gaps, priorities, and mechanisms for implementation in Yemen's peace process.

The third and final day of the workshop focused on the finalization of their recommendations. Meetings were also held with UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg, representatives of diplomatic missions to Yemen, and the European Union Mission to Yemen.

Dr. Maryam Alkubati holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences focused on Gender and Politics from the University of Tsukuba, Japan, where she was a recipient of the Japanese government MEXT scholarship. Dr. Alkubati has collaborated with NGOs, research institutes, and educational institutions like JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (Qatar), Radboud University (the Netherlands), and the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies (Yemen) as a researcher and gender specialist. Her research has mainly focused on women's political participation, women's role in peacebuilding, and sexual and gender-based violence in the Arab and MENA region.

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