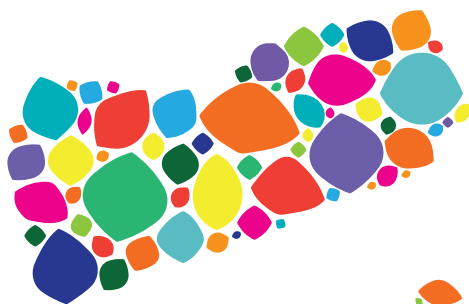




Yemen's New Networks in Women's Peacebuilding

Fatima Mutaher



منتدى سلام اليمن
YEMEN PEACE FORUM

Yemen's New Networks in Women's Peacebuilding

Fatima Mutaher

September 10, 2021

*Cover Photo : Amna Mahdi teaches children at a makeshift school she established near her home in Al-Muhib village, in Al-Tuhayta district of Hudaydah governorate on August 31, 2021.
Sana'a Center photo by Anwar Al Shareef*



The Yemen Peace Forum initiative is a track II youth and civil society platform facilitated by the Sana'a Center and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This interactive initiative seeks to both invest in building and empowering the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society actors and to engage them in critical national issues. Building on the Sana'a Center's core goal of producing knowledge by local voices, this initiative seeks to develop and invest in young policy analysts and writers across Yemen.

Funded by



Kingdom of the Netherlands



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN-led peace process to end the Yemen war has so far failed to meaningfully include women. Yet, women have made great contributions to peacebuilding during the war. New women's networks and alliances have emerged; in some cases these have absorbed women seeking the protection of collective action, particularly in north Yemen where the armed Houthi movement has brutally targeted female activists.

These new networks seek women's participation in peace negotiations and peacebuilding, and to raise Yemeni women's voices on international platforms. Other aims include addressing gender-based violence, mitigating the suffering of civilians, supporting prisoners and detainees and providing humanitarian relief. As well as forming new networks, Yemeni women have established initiatives, organizations and foundations during the war to foster peace and support their communities.

This report examines some of the women-led entities that have emerged amid conflict, from large-scale prominent networks such as the Women's Pact for Peace and Security and the Women's Solidarity Network, to local-level initiatives such as Hadramawt Women for Peace, a group of eight women who successfully advocated to reopen a key road, and, briefly, Al-Riyan airport. It also looks at women-led organizations such as the Marib Girls Foundation, which encourages the participation of women and young people in peacebuilding and social development.

This report explores the impact of these entities and the challenges they have faced. It is based on a review of research on UN Resolution 1325, which set the global Women, Peace and Security agenda. The author also conducted interviews with members of women's networks and alliances, women-led organizations and initiatives and women activists who have implemented individual initiatives, as well as feminist academics.

It finds that while women's peace building work on the ground has not translated into seats at the negotiating table, these new entities play an important role in building solidarity, in mitigating risks for women, especially activists, and in relief work. Crucially, the establishment of these networks, organizations and initiatives has contributed to maintaining the status of women in the public sphere in Yemen.

INTRODUCTION

The newly-appointed UN special envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, inherits a peace process that has until now failed to meaningfully include women. This is despite the fact that his predecessor, Martin Griffiths, spoke frequently about women's capacity to contribute to peace. During a briefing to the United Nations Security Council on November 11, 2020, Griffiths said: "I am one of those continually inspired by the courage and determination of women in Yemen to end the war and build peace, and indeed to be the primary champions of peace in Yemen."^[1]

In an earlier briefing, Griffiths had also noted his office's engagement with Yemeni women, via the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group and the Group of Nine, which were established by his office and UN Women.^[2] In addition, after meeting with 30 Yemeni women leaders in October 2020, Griffiths called on the warring parties to include women in their delegations to peace talks, a position he reiterated on several different occasions.^[3]

Such remarks were welcomed by feminist organizations working in peacebuilding in Yemen, particularly by those who are part of the Group of Nine, a network of women's organizations established in 2018 under the sponsorship of UN Women. For others, however, Griffiths' statements and meetings did not go far enough in supporting women, especially given the resources of his office. "[Griffiths] talks about meeting with a number of women and about [organizing a meeting] in which 30 women participated during a month as if it were an achievement," the late Murad al-Gharati, head of the Tamkeen Foundation and advisor to the internationally-recognized Yemeni government's ministry of human rights, commented in November 2020. "However, he did not talk about detained women or protecting women civilians who are continuously subjected to shelling and sniping. This activity could be carried out by an activist and does not require 100 employees."^[4]

[1] "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy to Yemen - Martin Griffiths," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, November 11, 2021, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-united-nations-security-council-special-envoy-yemen---martin-griffiths>

[2] "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the special envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, September 15, 2020, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-united-nations-security-council-special-envoy-yemen-%E2%80%93-mr-martin-griffiths>

[3] "UN Women and the Office of the Special Envoy for Yemen on the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the women, peace and security agenda," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, October 29, 2020, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/un-women-and-office-special-envoy-yemen-20th-anniversary-united-nations-security-council-resolution>

[4] Murad al-Gharati, Facebook page, November 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/algharati/posts/10223892573559806>

Women have indeed paid a heavy price for the war. Rights Radar organization counted 16,667 violations against women committed by the various warring parties between September 2014 and December 2019. These included 919 killings due to random or direct gunfire, artillery shelling, airstrikes and drone strikes.^[5] This was in addition to deaths due to disease and infection, gender-based violence and other causes.

The scale of detentions and forced disappearances of women during the current conflict is also unprecedented in Yemen. These incidents have mostly taken place in areas controlled by the armed Houthi movement.^[6] A recent human rights' report estimated that between December 2017 and December 2020, 1,181 women were detained by this group, including 293 girls aged under 18, along with hundreds of activists, teachers and humanitarian workers.^[7] The report also documented 71 cases of rape and four suicides.

Despite all this, Yemeni women have contributed to peacebuilding during the war. This report examines women's contributions to peace through organizations, foundations, networks, alliances and individual social initiatives. It also explores the impact of these contributions, while outlining some of the challenges they have faced. This report is based on a review of global, regional and Yemeni research on UN Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. In addition, the author conducted interviews with members of women's networks and alliances, women-led organizations and initiatives and women activists who have implemented individual initiatives, as well as feminist academics.

[5] "Yemen: Women in Storm of War", Rights Radar, March 8, 2020, <https://rightsradar.org/media/pdf/reports/Yemen%20Women%20in%20Storm%20of%20the%20War%20.pdf> p. 17.

[6] For more information on the detention of women during the conflict, see: "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014 - Detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen," UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 20, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A-HRC-45-CRP7-en.pdf>

[7] "Isolated from the World, Houthi Prisons Graves for Women," The Alliance of Women for Peace, 8 March Bloc for Yemen's Women & Yemeni Organization for Combating Human Trafficking, February 2021, <http://embassy-of-yemen.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ENGLISH-PART.pdf> p.4.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1325: THE WPS AGENDA

The importance of women's participation in peacebuilding is recognized in Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC) on October 31, 2000.^[8] This resolution set the global framework for the WPS agenda through four pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. It calls for the protection of women and girls during conflict and affirms the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The resolution was the first formal document issued by the UNSC requesting that all parties in a conflict respect women's rights and support women's participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction.

Over the years, many studies have examined the impact of Resolution 1325, and the challenges of implementing it. In Yemen, Sarah al-Arasi, an associate professor of international law at the Sharia faculty in Sana'a University, noted that women still lack equal voices in decision-making processes at all levels, including peace talks.^[9] Further, Yemen has not harmonized its national laws, or annulled discriminatory texts in legislation, to align with the international agreements that it has signed. Al-Arasi added that further challenges included a lack of social awareness about the importance of implementing international agreements, as well as a lack of will to place women in decision-making positions.

As a member state of the UN, Yemen is obliged to implement UNSC resolutions, including 1325. Indeed, some outcomes of the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) – such as quotas on women's political participation – aligned with the agenda of the resolution and its four pillars. Some, however, have stated that knowledge of the resolution was not widespread during the NDC.^[10] Institutions of the Yemeni government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were broadly unfamiliar

[8] "Security Council Resolution 1325," Peace Women, <http://peacewomen.org/SCR-1325>

[9] Sarah Al-Arasi, "The Arab Region's Response to Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security," Arab Women Organization, September 2016.

[10] Entlaq al-Mutawwkil, "Situation of Women in Yemen During Armed Conflicts," [AR] Forum for Women in Politics in the Arab Region, 2018, <https://cwpar.org/node/10>

with the resolution until 2014, when the Ministry of Human Rights launched a series of consultative workshops to develop a national action plan to implement the resolution. This was done in coordination with the Women's National Committee, the Ministry of Interior, civil society organizations and the media. However, workshops were suspended in March 2015 due to the escalation in hostilities, and resumed in August 2016, before being swiftly suspended again.^[11]

The war has fragmented state institutions and bodies between the armed Houthi movement and the internationally-recognized government. As a result, there are currently two sets of ministries and institutions, including those relevant to the WPS agenda, such as the Women's National Committee, which has two leaderships. In practice, the committee's work in areas under the control of the internationally recognized government has been generally frozen, while the committee has to work outside the peace agenda in Houthi-controlled territory, as the Houthi authorities often prevent activities related to peace or peacebuilding.

The UNSC has recommended that states should develop National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline government strategies to implement Resolution 1325. Such plans have since been adopted by multiple Arab countries, including Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. Following discussions by civil society in Yemen about the importance of developing a national strategy, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor of the internationally recognized Yemeni government adopted a NAP in December 2019. A number of civil society experts participated in devising the plan, which laid out an executive vision to implement Resolution 1325 in Yemen for 2020-2022.^[12]

In 2020, Doctor Ibtihaj al-Kamal, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor for the internationally recognized Yemeni government, said the plan was the fruit of national efforts led by her ministry, the relevant body to implement the UN resolution, made in cooperation with partners from government bodies and civil society institutions.^[13] She said the plan put forward practical measures, programs and projects to protect women, combat domestic violence and increase women's participation in decision-making positions, as well as to include women's needs in development plans.

[11] "Women, Peace and Security: The Role of Institutions in Times of Peace and War in the Arab Region," UN ESCWA, 2017, https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/women-peace-security-institutions-war-arab-english_o.pdf p.26.

[12] "National Plan to Implement Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Security and Peace 2020 - 2022," Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Yemen-NAP-English.pdf>

[13] Ibid.

NEW WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS EMERGE

As previously noted, prior to the war, resolution 1325 was not well-known by women's NGOs, although in some cases their work was aligned with the resolution's agenda and goals. After the outbreak of war, the activity of civil society organizations (CSOs) – the majority of which worked in the capital Sana'a – declined due to intimidation and harassment of CSO employees by the Houthi movement. Many CSO workers fled Sana'a to other parts of Yemen, or abroad. Those who stayed in Sana'a often stopped working or shifted to the relief sector, or started to work in newly established organizations.

The work of CSOs was also affected by donors' suspension of aid at the beginning of the war, and the suspension of programs and activities. Meanwhile, funding allocated to Yemen during the war has broadly been directed to relief work, at the expense of other human rights projects.

During the war, a number of women's alliances, networks and initiatives have been established in the field of peacebuilding. Often, activists have moved away from individual action – and away from well-known organizations that may be at risk – and sought to join such alliances for their collective protection. They also wanted to establish new entities inclusive of women from all political affiliations and parties – including parties to the conflict – and involve prominent activists from across the country, for the sake of diversity and solidarity.

The emergence of these new initiatives led UN Women to create a new body, the Group of Nine. In March 2019, this convened nine women's organizations at a conference in Amman called "Mediators for Peace". The Group of Nine includes: the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security; the Feminist Summit; the Peace Partners Alliance; the Marib Girls' Foundation, currently represented by Peace Makers; the Youth Leadership Foundation, represented by the Youth Consultative Council; Southern Women for Peace; Women's Voices for Peace; the Women for Yemen Network; and the Women's Solidarity Network, which withdrew in April 2020 to be replaced by the Youth Awareness Platform.

These initiatives either represent a single network, like the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, Women's Voices for Peace and the Women for Yemen Network, or a group of networks, such as the Peace Partners Alliance and the Feminist Summit. A number of women's alliances are not part of the Group of Nine, including the Mothers of Abductees Association, Hadramawt Women for Peace, Generations of the Future and others that will be discussed later in this paper. All these entities share the goals of ending the war in Yemen, calling for peace and demanding women's participation in peace negotiations and peacebuilding. They also call for raising Yemeni women's voices on international platforms, creating feminist solidarity, mitigating the suffering of civilians, especially women and children, opposing gender-based violence, supporting protection programs, following up on the cases of prisoners and detainees, building capacities, and providing humanitarian and relief aid.^[14]

The Women's Pact for Peace and Security is the most prominent feminist group working in the field of peacebuilding in Yemen, and its establishment encouraged the emergence of other initiatives whose work relies on Resolution 1325. The group was established in October 2015 at a conference in Larnaca, Cyprus, organized by UN Women. The conference was attended by 40 women from across the political spectrum and from different parts of Yemen, all nominated by the head of the Women's National Committee. Later, 30 more women were added; according to a source at the office of UN Women in Yemen, they were selected upon the recommendation of former members.

UN Women organizes an annual meeting for the members, often held in Amman, although this was held virtually in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Among the key outcomes of that 2020 meeting was the establishment of a coordination committee. Speaking to the author in early 2021, one of that committee's members, Lamiaa al-Iryani, said the Women's Pact was an entity created "to strengthen the role of women in peacebuilding, find a solution for Yemen and make women's voices heard." Al-Iryani added that the group had submitted consultative papers on political, economic and security issues to the special envoy's offices and issued statements.^[15] Al-Iryani suggested that the Pact might benefit from a clearer organizational structure. "Perhaps we need to evaluate the Pact again in 2021 and find a new mechanism and design a different structure," she said.

[14] These were the most important goals identified during interviews with initiative members by the author.

[15] Lamiaa al-Iryani, personal interview by the author via WhatsApp, January 23, 2021.

Membership of the new women's networks and alliances that have emerged during the war is voluntary. Most have an unelected leadership, while the founder is usually the director. Members are often not informed about the groups' work or projects, or about cooperation with donors or other women's organizations.^[16] A member in a prominent initiative, who preferred not to share its name publicly, said: "I joined the initiative because my friend asked me to and I couldn't say no, then later on, a membership form was distributed around the group and I did not fill it in, but I am still a member!" Another said: "I found myself in the network's WhatsApp group, where they were talking to us like we were members. These things happen a lot in such initiatives."

Some members of new initiatives said that as voluntary work, the groups did not need administrative or financial complications. Samira Zahra, a member of the Women's Solidarity Network, said that as the group's work was largely issuing statements and briefings – and the network was not funded – there was no need for administrative or financial measures.^[17] Zahra also noted that the Women's Solidarity Network had succeeded in relaying Yemeni women's voices to the UNSC, as well as raising awareness of the detention and abduction of women by the Houthi movement.^[18]

Rasha Jarhum, head of the Women's Solidarity Network, told the author in March 2021 that CSOs working on peacebuilding did not receive enough support. "There is a wrong view about this," she said, "as most activities we do are voluntary. Most support allocated by the UN to feminist organizations is temporary support and focuses on advocacy projects [...] and does not cover the costs of managing organizations."^[19]

The Women's Solidarity Network was established in 2013 to support women's rights in the constitution, with 70 women leaders, Jarhum said. The network resumed work in 2016 to "mobilize women's efforts to protect one another, especially after the protection system collapsed," as well as to advocate for women's rights and contribute to peacebuilding, she said.

[16] Interviews by the author with female members of the Women Solidarity Network, Peace Partners, Voices for Peace & Southern Women for Peace, who preferred not to be named.

[17] Samira Zahra, personal interview by the author by WhatsApp, January 30, 2021. Zahra was a member of the Women's Pact for Peace and Security, but said she resigned due to its impartiality.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Rasha Jarhoum, personal correspondence with the author by email, March 11, 2021.

Discussing the network's achievements, Jarhum said it had prepared a national WPS agenda, and implemented peacebuilding initiatives in Hudaydah, Marib, Taiz and Aden, as well as providing briefings to the UNSC and sending a delegation to influence the Riyadh Agreement. There are currently more than 300 members of the network from different political backgrounds from inside Yemen and the diaspora. "The most important principle of the network is not to attack one another as women, to respect different points of view and to acknowledge political differences," Jarhum said.^[20]

Some women are members of multiple initiatives, networks and alliances. Warda al-Awwadi, who is a member of the Lamar Initiative, Solidarity Network and Women's Voices for Peace, thinks this is positive, as these initiatives complement each other and aim to support women and protect them.^[21] Membership of multiple groups is demanding, however, and requires time and energy, she added.

During the coronavirus pandemic, which has restricted in-person meetings, members have been detached from the work undertaken by some initiatives, and less involved in decision making. Work related to Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, has been restricted to virtual events and online discussions, Al-Awwadi said. Meanwhile, initiatives often did not inform members of planned activities or funding sources and members were often only informed of activities a few days in advance.^[22]

[20] Ibid.

[21] Warda al-Awwadi, personal interview with the author on Facebook Messenger, February 1, 2021.

[22] A number of members of initiatives said they did not know if the initiatives received financial support, while others said they thought there was no funding because activities were limited to issuing statements.



SOCIAL INITIATIVES

Women have also contributed to peace during the war through initiatives to provide social services to mitigate the impact of the war on civilians. Throughout the conflict, many women – some of whom had never worked in the public sphere before – have entered the fields of education and rehabilitation, provided services such as emergency assistance or psychological support to the internally displaced, and worked in capacity-building to help women gain an income.

In March 2017, Ishraq Omar launched Future Generations to teach children who were not enrolled in school in Ad Durayhimi, a poor district in Hudaydah governorate. In June 2017, the initiative was helping 45 girls and 23 boys. It later expanded to include a ‘Peace Center’ to address illiteracy among women; 32 women joined, and 15 have graduated so far.^[23] The initiative provided computer, language, first aid, crafts and vocational courses for a small monthly fee, but during the war, many people were displaced and the headquarters were destroyed. The initiative was then limited to the Ash-Sharqiah neighborhood of the Ad Durayhimi district, although Omar later carried out some voluntary activities in the Al-Hawk district, in cooperation with private sector institutions.

Omar said that in addition to the challenges of the war, the initiative also faced difficulties in implementing development projects due to lack of funding. Most institutions were not willing to cooperate with the initiative’s team to implement joint projects, she added.^[24]

In the governorate of Hadramawt, a group of eight women formed the Hadramawt Women for Peace, following successful advocacy to reopen the local airport and a main road. After attending training in capacity building, analyzing conflict, communications, negotiations and planning in February 2018, the women held four focus groups to discuss and analyze critical local issues, such as the reopening of the Ash Shihr-Al Mukalla road and Al-Riyan airport.^[25]

[23] Ishraq Omar, personal interview with the author via WhatsApp on February 6, 2021.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Sulaf al-Hanshi, personal interview with the author via WhatsApp on February 19, 2021.

Ash-Shihr-Al-Mukalla road had been closed due to armed clashes, forcing people to take an alternative, rough road that took two-and-a-half hours, rather than the usual 45 minutes, and was costly and tiring. The road closure led some university students to stop attending classes, while some people needing medical treatment in Mukalla died en route because of the increased journey time. Due to the women's advocacy, the road temporarily opened for small cars from 6am to 6pm, before fully reopening in July 2019. The women also succeeded in securing the brief reopening of Al-Riyan airport. Two international flights landed in 2019 and early 2020, in addition to weekly UN flights. All flights were then suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, however, although they are expected to resume in 2021.

Sulaf al-Hanshi, a founding member of Hadramawt Women for Peace, told the author in February 2021 that women's participation in the UN-led peace process was generally weak despite women's ability to work for peace and influence society.^[26] "Women are not given opportunities and are eliminated in negotiations and committees working on peace," she said. "This leads to the deterioration of the situation of women." The UN special envoy's office had failed to empower women, she added, despite women's influence on the ground and their ability to bring peace and security, if given the opportunity.

Another organization established during the war is the Marib Girls Foundation, founded in August 2017 by Yasmeen al-Qadhi with the help of her parents and siblings. The foundation has become one of the most important women's organizations in the field of peace, with Al-Qadhi receiving the Women's International Courage Award in March 2020. Her group seeks to enhance the participation of women and young people in peacebuilding and social development. Saeed al-Youssefi, program manager at the foundation, told the author in February 2021 that its projects included ones targeting violence against women and youth recruitment into armed groups, as well as facilitating discussion among Yemeni youths.^[27] In addition, Al-Youssefi said the establishment of an early warning center for conflict resolution and peacebuilding was the foundation's most important achievement. The center brought together more than 30 'peace ambassadors' from different districts of Marib, who have resolved more than 30 issues since the beginning of 2020.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Saeed Al-Youssefi, personal interview with the author on February 17, 2021.

For Laila al-Thawr, assistant secretary general of the Arab Amal Party, the plight of prisoners and detainees during the war led her to engage in the field of human rights.^[28] Her shift from political activity to human rights began after a young man sought her help to release his friend, who was detained in Aden. She started working in mediation to release prisoners of war, and established an initiative with personal funds. On December 17, 2015, the initiative secured the release of 480 prisoners after around seven months of negotiations. The exchange took place between the armed Houthi movement and several parties in the south representing Hiraak, the Southern Transitional Council and parties that fought to push the Houthi movement from Aden in May 2015.

According to Al-Thawr, successful prisoner exchanges rely on the negotiator's knowledge of the social context and her use of all available assets – such as the positive perception of women in society, or her role as a public figure, which might confer respect and special treatment. Negotiators must also be able to respond swiftly to changing circumstances, she said. International protocols are not applicable to local prisoner exchanges, which do not have a fixed plan for implementation. “Those who succeed are those who know how to [address the current situation] and how to gain the trust of all parties, including the prisoners and their families,” Al-Thawr explained. “This is in addition to working in secret and not revealing the agreements’ initial information. Dealing with the media requires skill to use it positively, in favor of the prisoners, if needed.”

The ability to reach high-ranking decision-makers also helps to finalize negotiations quickly, she said. For Al-Thawr, internationalizing the prisoners’ file was a serious mistake: “This obstructs it and does not contribute to resolving it as it would be resolved if carried out through local mediators,” she said.

In 2018, a Houthi movement official accused Al-Thawr of membership of a “sleeper cell” after she published Facebook posts condemning Houthi movement raids of shops, looting of private properties and suspension of public sector wages. Fearing she would be arrested or killed for opposing the Houthis, she left Yemen in 2018. She has continued to work on the issue of prisoners and detainees, however, and is currently a consultant at the UN special envoy’s office. This office does not support her presence in prisoner exchange negotiations, however, instead asking her to participate via one of the conflict parties, she told the author.

[28] Laila al-Thawr, personal interview with the author, January 26, 2021.



IMPACT OF NEW NETWORKS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The women's networks and organizations discussed above broadly agree on the core goals of ending the war and supporting women's participation in negotiations and peacebuilding. Yet, despite their work, there were no female negotiators at the talks that led to the 2019 Riyadh Agreement, or at the ceasefire talks that followed. During negotiations for the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, women constituted just 4 percent of the delegates, a decrease from 12 percent during the talks in Kuwait in 2016, and there were no women present in the Houthi movement delegation.^[29]

The impact of women's minimal participation also requires further study to explore whether women who managed to reach the negotiations table were able to influence the talks once there. Notably, women have only participated as representatives of political parties, and not independently, in official talks.^[30]

For Souad al-Qudsi, head of the Women's Center for Studies and Training,^[31] women's networks and organizations – especially those established during the war for the purpose of peacebuilding – cannot influence the course of war. Women are not armed and they did not start the war, so they cannot stop it; only those with the power to engage in war have the ability to end it, Al-Qudsi said. Women are not a party to the war, she said, although they pay its price. Direct engagement in efforts to end the war is fruitless, and a waste of time and money, according to Al-Qudsi, who said women's organizations should work instead in other spheres, such as raising awareness of human rights – which needs continuous, sustained and long-term action.

Al-Qudsi also said it was important for organizations to be based inside the country. "What can they do on the ground in Yemen when they are not there?" she asked. Working from outside Yemen raised doubts about an organization's goals and credibility, which

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

[30] Entlaq al-Mutawwkil, "Situation of Women in Yemen During Armed Conflicts," [AR] Forum for Women in Politics in the Arab Region, 2018, <https://cwpar.org/node/10>

[31] Souad al-Qudsi, personal interview with author, January 21, 2021

affected how it was received inside Yemen. Some of these entities, whether inside or outside the country, were also criticized because they were “established based on political, partisan and even international agendas prepared in advance,” she said. “This makes them drown in political work at the expense of human rights work.”^[32]

A common explanation given for the low participation of women in UN-led peace processes is the quota system that allocates a specific number of seats at the negotiating table to the warring parties and political parties. Usually, parties nominate all-male delegations. When asked to include women, the Yemeni government, for example, argues that it is beyond its power to intervene in who political parties nominate to represent them.^[33]

Laila Al-Thawr told the author that the exclusion of women from peace talks was a political decision, rather than a societal one, as Yemeni society accepted women. “When the political decision was made to include women, society did not object,” she noted.^[34]

Some women working in the field of peacebuilding, however, said they faced challenges due to traditions and customs that viewed women’s participation in public work as shameful. Ishraq Omar, for example, said she stopped studying journalism during her second year at university for this reason. Al-Youssefi, the program manager at Marib Girls Foundation, noted that male-dominated professional environments deterred women in Marib from working in the public sphere, while Yemeni laws failed to grant women their rights.

The warring parties control the agenda in Yemen and women’s issues have sunk to the lowest priority; the urgency of focusing on the war is used to defer attention from issues affecting women. Protection of women is still weak for legislative and social reasons. It has also worsened during the war due to violence, economic crises and rising unemployment, among other factors.

Yet, despite such challenges, members of women’s initiatives established during the war said their groups were important for solidarity, while they also mitigate risks and threats against women – especially activists. Issuing statements can be effective

[32] Ibid.

[33] According to these parties’ statements about the elimination of women from the negotiating table.

[34] Laila al-Thawr, personal interview with the author, January 26, 2021.

in bringing issues to the attention of the public and external parties, which can help protect female activists from detention. Such statements have also exposed detentions that had been concealed by the detainees' families, while also encouraging people to report the disappearance, abduction or detention of women. Women have also made achievements in monitoring and following up on cases of violence against women, and have contributed to relief work through local groups. Ultimately, these networks, alliances and organizations are voices of peace amid war, rejecting violence and working to maintain the status of women in the public sphere.



RECOMMENDATIONS

From this research, the following ideas emerged for improving efforts by women's initiatives, while helping the UN implement resolution 1325 in Yemen.

For women's initiatives, networks and organizations:

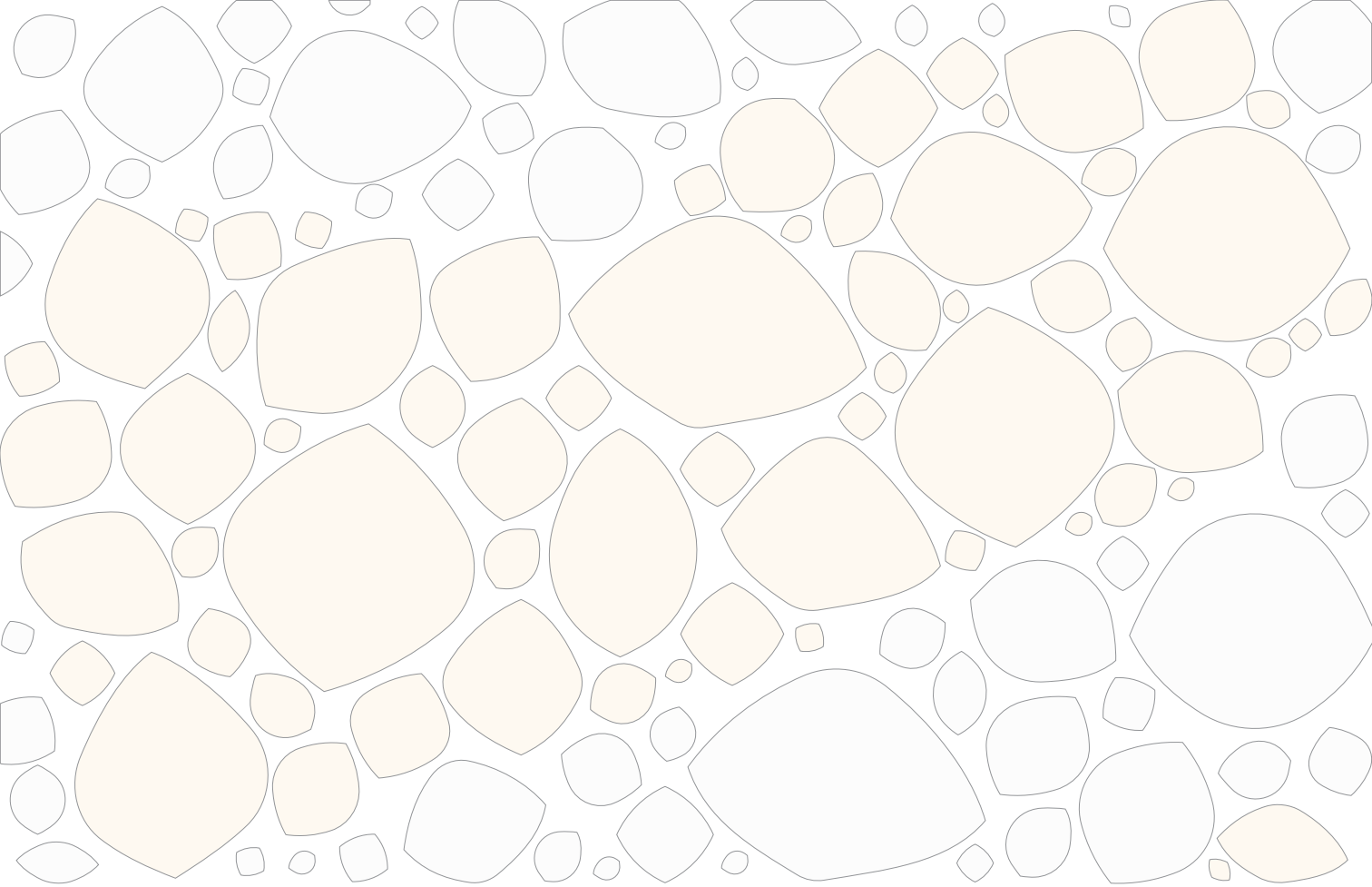
- A clear administrative structure is important to achieve stability and define tasks and responsibility, even if work is voluntary.
- Initiatives may benefit from setting short- and long-term strategies for their work, rather than implementing activities in an ad hoc manner.
- Efforts should be made to ensure internal transparency among members and external transparency with the public, media outlets and researchers regarding funding and the outcomes of projects.
- Greater cooperation and solidarity between organizations, initiatives and sectors, across different fields, would be more effective than scattered, siloed efforts.
- Partisan and political agendas should be set aside when performing feminist work related to human rights.

For UN Women and the UN Special Envoy

- The UN Special Envoy should promote the role of women in peacebuilding and exert real pressure in support of women's participation in negotiations.
- UN Women must listen to women's priorities and needs from all social and educational levels. It should ensure that its programs address these needs and are realistic and practical in the Yemeni context.
- Programs should target all governorates and not focus solely on major cities. Yemeni women have successfully implemented initiatives in remote governorates, demonstrating that it is feasible.
- Greater transparency is needed in providing information about UN programs in support of women to journalists and researchers.
- Further research should be commissioned to study the impact of women's participation in peace negotiations.
- An assessment should be undertaken of the work of peacebuilding organizations in Yemen, particularly those supported by UN Women, with a view to making them more effective.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fatima Mutaheer is a journalist specializing in women's issues.



THE SANA'A CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES IS AN
INDEPENDENT THINK-TANK THAT SEEKS TO FOSTER CHANGE
THROUGH KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION WITH A FOCUS ON
YEMEN AND THE SURROUNDING REGION

sanaacenter.org