

Women and peacebuilding in Yemen: challenges and opportunities

By Najwa Adra

■ Executive summary

This expert analysis explores hurdles facing and opportunities available to Yemeni women in light of UN Security Council Resolution 1325's guidelines. Yemen is rich in social capital with norms that prioritise the protection of women, but internal and external stresses pose serious threats to women's security.

Despite these hurdles, Yemeni women continue to participate in nation building. In 2011 women led the demonstrations that ousted the previous regime. At 27%, women's representation and leadership in the current National Dialogue Conference is relatively inclusive. Their calls for 30% women's participation in all levels of government have passed despite the opposition of religious extremists and the Yemeni Socialist Party. To provide the best guarantee of women's security in Yemen, international agencies must, firstly, pressure UN member states to desist from escalating conflicts in Yemen, and secondly, prioritise development over geopolitical security concerns. Literate women with access to health care and marketable skills can use their participatory traditions to build a new Yemeni nation.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) has succeeded in inserting discussion of women's concerns into Security Council discourse. Its charge to increase representation for women at all levels of peacebuilding and include gender perspectives in programming and support have led to national action plans and successful interventions in several countries. Challenges remain, however, with the universal implementation of this resolution. This expert analysis explores hurdles facing and opportunities available to Yemeni women and suggests ways in which UNSCR 1325 and international interventions can reduce women's vulnerability and promote their capacities for effective state-building. It is based on the author's long-term field research in Yemen (1978-2005), a review of the relevant literature, and recent interviews with Yemeni officials (who have requested anonymity).

Yemen is currently in transition. Following public demonstrations, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to step down in November 2011. A UN-backed Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) agreement granted him immunity and arranged for a transfer of power to a transitional

government headed by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, Yemen's former vice-president. A National Dialogue Conference (NDC) composed of representatives from established political parties, including that of the former president, youth, women, and marginalised groups, has been charged with developing a framework for a new Yemeni state. However, the GCC agreement, while charging the transitional government to cease all forms of violence, does not exert pressure on the external states that are funding Yemen's escalating war in the northern region and the various separatist factions in the south.

Widespread corruption and capital flight, along with environmental degradation, high unemployment rates and ongoing conflicts, have led to a severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen, with 55% of the population suffering from food insecurity and the lack of health services. Exacerbating these problems are an estimated 1.2 million refugees from Ethiopia, Somalia and Syria and over 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Yemenis also suffer from ongoing attacks by al-Qaeda affiliates and U.S. drones.

Despite these serious problems, however, Yemen is rich in social capital. Deep-seated traditions of mediation and conflict resolution have been effective restraints against the facile use of violence (Adra, 2011). The protection of women is a local norm, and women are rarely victims of assault or direct targets of violence (Adra, 1983).¹ When religious extremists beat some vociferous women during the 2011 uprising, their act was severely condemned, even by members of their own party. During the same period when presidential hopeful Hamid al-Ahmar broadcast verbal attacks against women's participation in street demonstrations, four women took him to court for slander. A political assassination in September 2013 sparked public outrage because two women and a child were among those killed. Even members of al-Qaeda, who severely restrict women's mobility in the towns they control, have not assaulted women in Yemen.² Nevertheless, Yemeni women, like men, suffer from escalating conflicts in the north and south, extreme poverty, and state corruption. Women have been hurt or killed in cross fire and when heavy artillery and bombs are used, and have been killed by drones. Women have also been harmed during recent uprisings when government forces shot at demonstrators.

Contrary to common stereotypes of "conservative tribal" societies, rural Yemeni women are not secluded; they participate actively in the local economy and the mediation of disputes (Adra, 2011). Urban women, in contrast, are secluded by tradition, although the extent of their seclusion differs by region, community, class and level of education. Women with the highest levels of education participate actively in the labour force and government, and the poorest women, who cannot afford to remain at home, have always worked for wages. In urban and rural communities Yemeni women are known to be agentive and assertive. In 2006, 42% of voters were women. It is not surprising that women led the demonstrations of the past two years against the corruption of the previous regime. In sum, traditional social capital empowers Yemeni women and facilitates their participation in nation-building. They are severely constrained, however, by humanitarian crises, externally funded warfare and government corruption.

Refugees

Female refugees are especially vulnerable, in part because they do not have the protection of male kin. They suffer first from conflicts in their home countries. On their way to Yemen and after their arrival many are subject to abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking and sometimes torture. Attacks on Ethiopian and Somali refugees appear to be organised, and ruling elites are alleged to have profited from arms and human trafficking (Hill et al., 2013; RMMS & DRC, 2012). The current transitional government appears to be unable or unwilling to halt these practices.

The impacts of poverty on women's security

Although the framing of conflict and security issues in UNSCR 1325 prioritises traditional understandings of conflict and security (warfare), the alleviation of poverty and unemployment are the most salient "security" priorities for a large majority of Yemen's population. With high maternal mortality, infant mortality, and adult illiteracy rates, poverty affects women disproportionately. Although wife beating and honour killings are rare in Yemen, "unprecedented" rates of domestic abuse among impoverished urban migrants have been reported (Carapico, 1996: 92). Child marriage has increased among the poor. The ages of 14 or 15 years are traditionally considered optimal for marriage among rural families, but with 10.5 million people food insecure, younger girls of poor families are increasingly given in marriage. Some young girls are married to wealthy Saudi men who abandon them after a few months.

Historically and currently a woman's status impacts her vulnerability. Although economic and educational opportunities have led to considerable social mobility, the lowest status groups in Yemen, commonly labelled "*akhdam*",³ remain excluded. Most members of this group suffer extreme poverty and their women are vulnerable to harassment. They have one representative in the NDC.

When the state perpetuates women's vulnerability

UNSCR 1325 places the burden of compliance on member states. Unfortunately, and in spite of local safety nets for women, the Yemeni state tends to limit women's economic and political participation in society. Yemen has not ratified UNSCR 1325. An influx of weapons from external parties allowed powerful elites to perpetuate local conflicts, leading to the displacement of women and men, the loss of property, and a consequent reduction of rural women's agricultural and economic roles. Government co-optation of influential tribal leaders has resulted in a breakdown in tribal rules of restraint and protection of women.

A major constraint to the participation of women in leadership roles has been the growing power of religious extremists: the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabis and Salafis. Although they advocate interpretations of Islam that are not native to Yemen, they have penetrated educational institutions, ministries, political parties and rural tribal leadership. Initially funded by Saudi Arabia and more recently Qatar, Turkey and possibly Iran, these movements give lip service to women's rights, but target women's mobility and public voice, and reject minimum marriage ages and progressive family laws. Although religious extremists insist they are adhering to Islamic tradition, they are perceived locally as "modern" because their interpretations of Islam clash with local traditions and their recommended lifestyles resemble those in wealthy Gulf states.

1 Author telephone interview with Yemeni official, October 2013.

2 Author telephone interview with Yemeni official, October 2013.

3 The term means "servants" in Arabic, but in Yemen it traditionally referred to dark-skinned, very low-status occupational groups. Currently in Yemen the term refers primarily to street cleaners and impoverished residents of squatter communities (Adra, 2006).

Consequently, women in Yemen have steadily lost gains achieved in the 1960s and 1970s. Women in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) were active in the judiciary, army and police force. Since the unification of North and South Yemen, however, female judges have been removed, women who held military posts have been pressured to resign, and police women now only work in non-combative desk jobs. The transitional government has named only three women ministers: the minister of social affairs, minister of human rights and minister of state. Only one signatory of the UN-brokered GCC agreement is a woman. This agreement specifies that women's representation in the transitional government should be "adequate", with no mention of UNSCR 1325. However, women's representation in the current NDC, at 27%, is relatively inclusive, and women are included in leadership roles. In the past few months the NDC's calls for 30% women's participation in all levels of government have passed despite the vehement opposition of the Islah Party, Salafis and the Yemeni Socialist Party.

In sum, the case of Yemen challenges assumptions that rural traditions are more likely to constrain women's rights and agency than modern urban institutions. Although Yemen is rich in social capital, including protection and safety nets for women, external and internal stresses have fueled overt conflict and contributed to poverty, displacement and trafficking. Poverty and other humanitarian issues pose serious threats to women's security, exacerbating conflict and exploitation. By prioritising geopolitical security issues related to the so-called war on terror over development, international organisations have severely limited the capacity of Yemeni women (and men) to build sustainable state institutions. External funding has facilitated the penetration of powerful extremist interpretations of Islam that severely hinder women's agency and continue to perpetuate warfare throughout the country. Neither the NDC nor the transitional government has "significantly challenge[d] the informal networks of power that have proved remarkably resilient to change in the past" (Hill et al., 2013: 27).

Recommended interventions

In light of UNSCR 1325, recommendations are twofold: Yemen's escalating war in Sa'da in northern Yemen and separatist conflicts in the south are highly dependent on external arms flows. The Security Council and international organisations must pressure UN member states to stop

perpetuating warfare in Yemen. Secondly, in order to guarantee women's security in Yemen, development aid must address the country's humanitarian needs, prioritise the resettlement of IDPs, ensure the protection of refugees and halt human trafficking. Both women and men in Yemen need training in literacy and marketable skills, and rural women living on rain-fed agricultural lands would greatly benefit from agricultural and livestock extension (Adra, 2013). To the extent that international agencies are involved in advising Yemen's transitional government, efforts should be made to avoid reinstating members of the past ruling elite.

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