



GRASSROOTS VOICES:

Women and Everyday Peacebuilding in Yemen

By Maryam Alkubati, Huda Jafar
and Esham Al-Eryani

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Cover photo: The morning assembly of Al-Wehda Girls School in Taiz city on
August 24, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over eight years of war in Yemen have had dire consequences on people's day-to-day lives and shaped their definitions and perceptions of peace. Years of failed negotiations have allowed the warring factions to monopolize conversations on peace. Within these negotiations, women at both the local and national level have been largely excluded, despite them being at the forefront of mitigating the war's impact on Yemenis. Utilizing a community-centered approach, this study seeks to give agency to Yemenis to define peace based on their own lived experiences, propose practices that promote women's role in peacebuilding, and suggest ways to mitigate local practices that produce or reproduce gender inequalities and violent or non-peaceful practices. The study heavily draws on feminist literature that argues the 'hidden' everyday practices carried out by women — procreation, day-to-day routines, caregiving, satisfying basic human needs, negotiating inequalities, social relations, and resolving conflict—are integral to social cohesion, but inadequately researched nor recognized.

One hundred twenty-eight Yemeni women and men from different age groups, geographical areas, and socio-economic backgrounds took part in this research. Focus group discussions were held in the governorates of Sana'a, Ibb, Aden, and Hadramawt between January and March 2022. Across the governorates, interviews were also carried out with various decision-makers, community leaders, imams, and religious leaders. The study does not aim to give a representative overview of the experiences of all women in Yemen, given its diversity and the limitations of conducting fieldwork in the country. Instead, it utilizes a micro-level approach to amplify local voices and agency. Allowing Yemenis to use a familiar language, identify their needs and priorities while also utilizing peace practices from their daily lives, creates enabling environments for women to participate in peacebuilding, and enhances larger peace intervention mechanisms. Furthermore, defining peace and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda from the perspectives of local actors and grassroots women shifts the focus from a Western-centric approach toward a Yemeni-centric one. Below is a summary of the findings that emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews.

Yemenis' definitions of peace are similar, with some regional differences. Across the four governorates, participants' definitions of peace mainly centered around security and stability, freedom of mobility and speech, meeting basic needs, coexistence embedded in Islamic faith, and peace as dignity. Women and men had similar definitions of peace. However, among participants from Sana'a governorate, where restrictive measures on social conduct and mobility under the Houthi authorities have become more prevalent, peace as freedom of expression and movement was more prominently voiced than in other governorates. In Aden, more pronounced was the desire for "peaceful coexistence and the rejection of racism and sectarianism."

Women's role in peacebuilding is widely recognized, but many associate it with the private sphere. Regardless of their gender, background, or geographical location, participants consulted throughout the course of this research agreed that women play a critical role in peacebuilding. The majority, however, associated this role within the confines of the private sphere (the home), primarily as mothers (revered as society's primary peacebuilders, responsible for raising peaceful generations, and maintaining social cohesion) or in realms deemed as extensions of the private sphere (i.e., schools, mosques, and female gatherings).

Female peace activists face social stigma from both women and men. The focus group discussions revealed that women publicly active in the field of peacebuilding in Yemen face social stigma, a perception held by both men and women, with some women stating that female peace activists did not necessarily represent them. Harassment of female peace activists in both Houthi-controlled territories and those under the internationally recognized government were widely reported, with defamation campaigns cited as the prime obstacle hindering women from engaging more publicly in peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding work is viewed by many as a 'Western concept'. Terms like 'peace' or 'peacebuilding' and 'gender equality' are perceived as Western concepts among some segments of Yemeni society, which inevitably hinders the work of people and organizations, and women in particular, who were perceived by some as 'naively' accepting Western concepts dictated by local and international organizations. Many respondents were skeptical of international organizations that call for the promotion of peace. Officials and community leaders interviewed in Houthi-held Sana'a and Ibb completely rejected the role of international organizations in spreading peace on the ground. In Hadramawt and Aden, mosque preachers and religious figures were also distrusting of the international organizations, although they were open to supporting them if their work aligns with the principles of Islam and Islamic rulings.

Day-to-day survival mechanisms employed by Yemeni women are integral to social cohesion. In their daily lives, women were found to negotiate inequalities, mediate family and community conflict, navigate insecurity, and practice daily resistance and resilience. This was largely done within private spaces (homes, neighborhoods, mosques, schools) more so than public ones (political platforms) predominantly occupied by men. At the grassroots level, respondents cited many examples of women mediating conflict and noted a tradition of conflict resolution embedded in Yemeni culture, which views women as catalysts for peace when conflict arises.

Religious discourse that both empowers and incites. Many women cited restrictions on travel, notably the need for a male guardian (*mahram*), the need to maintain segregation, the impossibility of spending late hours at work, the innate skepticism of women working in the promotion of peace, the misleading religious discourse by some sheikhs, and the weak support provided by the family as just some of the restrictions imposed on women. Often, these are based on extremist and conservative interpretations of Islam. While misconstrued interpretations of Islam were said to oppress women, many women felt that when channeled

in the right direction, religious discourse was empowering. Female Islamic preachers (*daiya*)^[1] in Yemen, for instance, were viewed as important actors in empowering women through religious arguments, equipping them with strong foundations in Islamic law to be able to counter extremist narratives.

Full recommendations are offered at the end of this report and serve as a guide for both domestic and international stakeholders to promote a more inclusive and bottom-up approach to peacebuilding and encourage better integration of women's daily peacebuilding practices in larger peace frameworks. Specifically targeting the international community, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESFY) and local actors working in the field of peacebuilding and gender equality these include:

- Recognize human security as an integral component of peacebuilding efforts.
- Empower grassroots women in Yemen by recognizing their everyday practices in peacebuilding.
- Engage men as partners and advocates for female peacebuilders.
- Localize peacebuilding initiatives by building on Yemenis' definitions of peace and approaches to peacebuilding.
- Enforce laws that protect peace activists in Yemen.
- Collaborate with local and national organizations to raise awareness on peace projects and peacebuilding work on the ground with the goal of building trust with local communities who are increasingly skeptical of peacebuilding work.
- Engage religious and community leaders in women's empowerment for peace.

^[1] A *daiya*, also called a sheikha, is a female Islamic preacher that teaches other women about Islam and spreads the message of the Holy Book of Islam, the Quran.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Exploring what war, peace, or inclusion mean to Yemenis, or specifically to Yemeni women, requires Yemeni women to build a language from lived experiences – to tell our stories and produce our knowledge, without regard to criticisms that lived stories lack objectivity.”^[2]

Traditional two-party approaches to conflict mediation and peacebuilding need to be reimagined. Reports show that within five years of negotiating peace agreements or signing peace accords, the recurrence rate of civil wars is between 30 to 50 percent,^[3] which points to a critical need for international actors to identify alternative paths and approaches to conflict mediation, resolution, and peacebuilding.^[4]

In Yemen, the current approach to the formal peace process, which has predominantly focused on brokering ceasefire agreements, is largely failing Yemenis.^[5] Negotiations continue to be largely confined to the warring parties,^[6] marginalizing other critical actors in Yemen, not least women.^[7] The sidelining of women is concerning, given that women have been engaged in community cohesion and peacebuilding since the onset of war, actively mitigating its impact through local mediation efforts and initiatives in line with Track II processes.^[8] Local women's groups and peace activists have played important roles in diffusing conflict by mobilizing constituencies, cooperating with community leaders, and negotiating with different warring factions to end violence and human rights violations.^[9] Equally important, but less talked about, is the fact that within the private sphere and the practices of their daily lives, women actively support social cohesion, yet their voices have been largely ignored and their day-to-day survival practices not sufficiently researched nor recognized.^[10]

Against this backdrop, some feminist approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding prove useful because they situate ‘peace’ at the ‘micro-level’ in the everyday lives of individuals.^[11]

^[2] Saba Hamzah, “Reclaiming Inclusive Peace: Scaling the Poetics of Conflict,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, September 5, 2022, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Reclaiming_Inclusive_Peace_Scaling_the_Poetics_of_Conflict_en.pdf

^[3] “World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development,” World Bank, 2011, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4389>

^[4] Women’s participation in peace negotiations has been shown to increase the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting at least 15 years by 35 percent. See OECD, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict Afflicted Situations: A Review of Donor Support,” OECD Policy Paper No.8, 2017, https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragilit/resilience/docs/Gender_equality_in_fragile_situations_2017.pdf

^[5] Saba Hamzah, “Reclaiming Inclusive Peace: Scaling the Poetics of Conflict,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, September 5, 2022, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Reclaiming_Inclusive_Peace_Scaling_the_Poetics_of_Conflict_en.pdf

^[6] Primarily the internationally recognized government, the Houthi authorities, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and other warring factions.

^[7] “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/>

^[8] Track II diplomacy is the unofficial dialogue and problem-solving activities aimed at building relationships and encouraging ideas that inform the official peace process.

^[9] 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

^[10] It is important to note here that there are instances where women in Yemen have directly contributed to violence, which will be discussed during this study.

^[11] Catia C. Confortini, “Galtung, Violence, and Gender: The Case for a Peace Studies/Feminism Alliance,” *Peace & Change*, Vol. 31, No. 3, July 2006, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2006.00378.x>

Scholars argue that the ‘hidden’ everyday practices carried out by women in their day-to-day lives — procreation, day-to-day routines, caregiving, satisfying basic human needs, negotiating inequalities, social relations, resolving conflict, and so on — are integral to peace.^[12] Incorporating women’s daily practices in peacebuilding, they argue, could help frame and construct community practices that lead to peace on the ground, thus localizing peace intervention mechanisms such as the UN Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, specifically UNSCR 1325, which recognizes the importance of women’s participation in peacebuilding processes.

Addressing these gaps, this paper explores definitions of peace and women’s everyday peacebuilding roles and practices from the perspectives of Yemeni women and men. Focusing on the social and everyday realities, a community-centered approach guides this study and gives agency to Yemenis to define peace from their own lived experience and propose ways to mitigate local practices that produce/reproduce inequalities and violent or non-peaceful practices. Drawing on focus group discussions carried out with 128 Yemeni women and men from different age groups, geographical areas, and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as interviews carried out with officials and community leaders, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are Yemeni women and men’s definitions of peace?
2. How do Yemeni women and men view women’s role as peacebuilders?
3. How do women build peace in their communities?
4. What are the challenges facing Yemeni women in peacebuilding and how can they be addressed?

^[12] Boulding, E, “Cultures of peace: the hidden side of history,” Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, May 1, 2000.

1.2 Gender Relations in Yemen and Changes During the Current Crisis

For years, Yemen has consistently ranked as having one of the widest gender disparities in the world.^[13] Yemen is a highly patriarchal society where strict gender norms dictate the roles of men and women in society, and where traditional belief systems, such as that of women and girls being considered *du'afa* (weak) and in need of male 'protection', still prevail.^[14] Gender segregation practices, mobility, and access to education and employment, however, vary widely. Depending on age, employment status, geographical region,^[15] rural or urban settings, socio-economic status, and support of the family, some Yemeni women may have more decision-making power than others.



The onset of the war in Yemen has in many ways exacerbated existing gender injustices that reverberate across rural/urban and geographical divides. Women's workload has increased considerably as they take on the weight of care responsibilities,^[16] often under very harsh conditions. Across Yemen, a higher incidence of early marriage of girls due to financial pressures and security concerns has been reported, with marriage to wealthy older men from

^[13] In the 2021 Global Gender Gap report, Yemen ranked the second lowest country (155th place from 156 countries). See "Global Gender Gap Report 2021," World Economic Forum, March 30, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/>

^[14] Ibid.

^[15] After the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, for example, the respective legal systems converged, but it was the conservative principles guiding the North that prevailed, which meant women lost many of the rights they enjoyed under the legal system of the South. Under the unified legal system, the Personal Status Law discriminates against women in many areas of private life such as marriage, divorce, and household responsibilities. It also significantly inhibits women's movement and decision-making power.

^[16] The ILO highlights how, across the globe, women in conflict settings tend to take on the burden of care work (children, the elderly, people with disabilities etc.) which is made worse in a context of damaged infrastructure and housing. International Labour Organization, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the World of Work in Fragile, Conflict and Disaster settings", 2022, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-promotion/recovery-and-reconstruction/WCMS_840082/lang--en/index.htm

other governorates or outside Yemen identified as a growing concern.^[17] Gender-based violence, although predating the conflict, has witnessed an unprecedented surge since the crisis^[18] as challenged masculinities, in terms of men failing to provide for their families, make men more susceptible to recruitment into armed groups, which contributes to domestic tension and increased violence.^[19] Traditional Yemeni social values that focus on protecting women and that hold attacks on them during wartime as shameful (as per the concept of *du'afa*) are also showing signs of erosion. Over the past eight years, women have been subjected to targeting by snipers, detention and forced disappearances, sexual violence, and displacement,^[20] pointing to unprecedented forms of violence that have emerged with the war.

In parallel, women's agency has been further diminished by their declining political participation and their almost entire marginalization from the formal peace process.^[21] To date, Yemeni women have had little to no representation in the most crucial peace negotiations that have taken place and have been consistently marginalized by both the warring parties and the international organizations overseeing the peace process. Alongside this deterioration, however, there are signs of women taking on new roles and responsibilities, capitalizing on openings triggered by the war.

Financial necessity due to economic collapse has resulted in women's growing participation in the labor market as many men are either sent to fight or lost their livelihoods due to Yemen's economic collapse. Recent studies point to an increase in women seeking employment, starting new enterprises, often home-based businesses, or entering professions that were previously dominated by men.^[22] The humanitarian response has also created new employment opportunities for a small but growing number of young urban women who are taking on leadership roles in international organizations, the private sector, and local non-governmental organizations.^[23] Although not all women are benefitting from this opening, and many have reportedly resorted to low-paid, informal physical labor, such as domestic work or begging,^[24] these are important developments to note. At the time of writing, however, both pre- and post-war gains made by women are increasingly at risk of being derailed. In Houthi-controlled territories, growing oppressive measures against women in Yemen, including the requirement of a *mahram* for women to conduct all manners of activities including traveling,^[25] threaten to remove Yemeni women from public life.

^[17] 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>

^[18] For a comprehensive assessment of gender-based violence in Yemen and its increase since the war, see: Sawsan Al-Refai, "How Humanitarian and Peace Frameworks Fail to Respond Systematically to Gender- Based Violence in Yemen," Yemen Policy Center, December 2022, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/how-humanitarian-and-peace-frameworks-fail-to-respond-systemically-to-gender-based-violence-in-yemen/>

^[19] International Labour Organization, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the World of Work in Fragile, Conflict and Disaster Settings," 2022, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-promotion/recovery-and-reconstruction/WCMS_840082/lang-en/index.htm

^[20] 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

^[21] Maryam Alkubati, "Women's Voices in Yemen's Peace Process: Priorities, Recommendations and Mechanisms for Effective Inclusion," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 25, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/19400>

^[22] 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>

^[23] Marta Colburn, "A New Path Forward: Empowering A Leadership Role for Yemeni Civil Society," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13021>

^[24] 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>

^[25] Amnesty International reported that "since April (2022), the Houthi de facto authorities have increasingly insisted on the mahram requirement to restrict the movement of women across areas they control in northern Yemen, including Sa'ada, Dhamar, Hodeidah and Hajjah governorates, and Sana'a." Although the mahram requirement is not part of Yemeni law, it is being enforced by the Houthi authorities through 'verbal directives'. See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/yemen-huthis-suffocating-women-with-requirement-for-male-guardians/>

1.3. Feminist Literature: The Everyday Through a Feminist Lens

“To recognize the existence of an everyday peace amidst a system of violence is to acknowledge the embodied beings in that environment, who move through it, negotiate it, and contribute to the ongoing process of building peace in such environments.”^[26]

Across the globe, women are said to have unique responses to conflict settings. The absence of safety, stability, and security disrupts the natural flow of relationships, but in their day-to-day life, women continue to carry out their day-to-day activities despite facing violence and oppressive structures of power.^[27] Some feminist theories have proved useful in examining peace. Utilizing a bottom-up approach, scholars have situated peace at the ‘micro-level’ of individuals’ everyday lives,^[28] an approach that generates a distinct kind of knowledge, pertaining to human needs and fulfillment that derive from building and sustaining relationships within a community.^[29]

These theories argue that women engage in peace activism not because of their inherent peaceful nature, but in response to distress caused by conflict and displacement. Sociologist Elise Boulding, for instance, provides examples of women’s peacemaking practices in African and Asian countries, demonstrating how women played a key role in disarming militias and armed groups in conflicts and civil wars using traditional approaches.^[30] She notes how in Sri Lanka and Mozambique, for instance, women participated in village councils, proposed solutions to local problems, and worked with ex-combatants and guerillas to develop reconciliation projects that took into consideration all warring parties’ perspectives.^[31] This is also seen in Yemen, where the role of women in conflict mediation is embedded in Yemeni culture, especially among tribal women,^[32] and where examples of women mediating conflict among their families, neighborhoods, and communities abound. Boulding argues that the ‘hidden’ everyday practices carried out by women— procreation, day-to-day routines, resolving conflict, and satisfying basic human needs— are integral to peace but tend to be disregarded because of the mundane nature of daily tasks.^[33]

^[26] Helen Berents, “Young People and Everyday Peace: Exclusion, Insecurity, and Peacebuilding in Colombia,” Routledge, August 14, 2020, <https://www.routledge.com/Young-People-and-Everyday-Peace-Exclusion-Insecurity-and-Peacebuilding/Berents/p/book/9780367592042>

^[27] Ibid.

^[28] Catia C. Confortini, “Galtung, Violence, and Gender: The Case for a Peace Studies/Feminism Alliance,” *Peace & Change*, Vol. 31, No. 3, July 2006, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2006.00378.x>

^[29] Henri Lefebvre, “The Production of Space,” Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley- Blackwell, August 1991, <https://www.wiley.com/en-jp/The+Production+of+Space-p-9780631181774>

^[30] Boulding, E, “Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History,” Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, May 1, 2000.

^[31] Ibid.

^[32] 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

^[33] Boulding, E, “Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History,” Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, May 1, 2000.

Similarly, care practices such as caregiving and nurturing that are associated with relationality, emotions, and empathy are central to some feminist standpoints.^[34] Proponents of care practices reject violence and embrace non-violent approaches such as persuasion, mediation, penance, or appealing to a higher power, which are all practices reflected in 'care ethics' approaches. A pioneer in conceptualizing care ethics and 'maternal practices', Sara Ruddick contends that mothers and caretakers or caregivers who adhere to ethics of non-violence raise children that are guided by similar principles, resist violence, oppression, and exploitation, and adhere to moral and ethical principles such as integrity and justice.^[35] She also recognizes that ethics of care are not grounded in biological essentialism, acknowledging that not all mothers embody practices of maternal practices and that these can be employed by men as well.

Ruddick delineates the opposing pull between 'mothering' and 'war', or 'maternal thinking' and 'military thinking'. While the former brings life, nurtures the body and mind, and encourages growth, the latter trains soldiers to fight, endangers bodies and minds, and encourages harm. Mothers in their roles at home, argues Ruddick, do not lack agency but rather actively build nourishing environments and conditions for their families to thrive in diverse contexts and settings. Applied to a Yemeni context, using the care lens and uncovering the intricacies involved in creating and maintaining relationships within communities is key to understanding peacebuilding and conflict management practices at the local level. Such an approach gives agency to women to define peace from their own perspectives and propose practices that promote peace and women's roles in peacebuilding while also identifying local practices that produce or reproduce violent or non-peaceful practices and recommending ways to mitigate them.

^[34] Tiina Vaittinen, et al., "Care as everyday peacebuilding." In *Feminist Interventions in Critical Peace and Conflict Studies*, Routledge, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1588453>, pp. 67-82.

^[35] Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace," The Women's Press, 1989, <https://philpapers.org/rec/RUDMTT>

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach. It draws on findings derived from focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out between January and March 2022 in Sana'a, Ibb, Aden, and Hadramawt. The four governorates were purposely chosen for their population density and for political balance (two Houthi-controlled areas and two areas under the internationally recognized government).

The FGDs included 128 Yemeni women and men from different age groups, geographical areas, and socio-economic backgrounds. Twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with officials (decision-makers, general managers, and political leaders) and community leaders (imams and religious actors). A total of 16 focus groups were held across the four governorates— four groups per governorate and two groups per area (rural and urban), with 32 participants per governorate— 16 female participants and 16 male participants. Both the FGDs and semi-structured interviews were carried out by a field team of eight female researchers, who were trained on research tools, gender concepts, research ethics, and criteria for the selection of participants and obtaining informed consent. Two field researchers were assigned to each focus group, in addition to a facilitator and notetaker. Questions were purposely formulated in a neutral manner to avoid raising any sensitivity among the participants. Facilitators also ensured the participants understood the nature of the study, its objectives, and what was expected from the participants.^[36]

2.1 Limitations of study

Limitations faced when preparing this study include security considerations, budgetary constraints, and the sensitivity of the topics among some participants as well as the precarious security situation in some of the governorates. To protect the identity of the women and men that participated in this study, no names were used whilst citing observations.

^[36] See Appendix 1 for a summary of the data collection tools used for the purpose of this study.

3. YEMENIS' DEFINITIONS OF PEACE FROM A HUMAN SECURITY LENS

Yemeni women and men participating in this study were asked what peace meant to them. The following section reflects the findings derived from the focus group discussions as well as observations obtained from officials and community leaders during interviews.

Peace is Security and Stability but Also Coexistence

Yemenis have endured devastating consequences in their daily lives resulting from the conflict. A UNDP 2019 assessment of the humanitarian impact on Yemen estimated nearly a quarter of a million people had been killed directly by fighting and indirectly through lack of access to food, health services, and infrastructure,^[37] a figure that will have likely gone up considerably at the time of writing. Many Yemenis have been displaced, and lost loved ones, livelihoods, homes, and their right to basic needs. Almost a decade of war has also shaped their perception of peace. When asked what peace means to them, many emphasized security and stability as fundamental prerequisites for a peaceful existence. In Ibb, a participant defined peace as “security in one’s environment, the opposite of war, and a culture of engaging in civil life.”^[38] For a female respondent from Sana’a, peace was “to be reassured in my house, in my neighborhood, on my street, in my movements, entries, and exits,”^[39] while another noted how she was scared to send her daughter to the grocery shop because of the lack of safety and government. Among respondents from Aden, in parallel with a desire for security and stability was also ‘coexistence’ and the ‘rejection of racism and sectarianism.’^[40]

The reference to coexistence in Aden has a historical context. Since the 1940s, Aden’s doors have been open to migrants, including Ethiopians, Indians, Somalis, and others, contributing to a rich ethnic and cultural diversity in the governorate.^[41] Political developments after the civil war in 1994, however, have had an impact on Aden’s culture of tolerance, which has deteriorated further since the onset of the current war. Hostile attitudes against people coming from northern parts of the country have been exacerbated. Such increased levels of intolerance can be traced back to Yemen’s unification in 1990, which failed to establish a national bond between northerners and southerners and unite the country as one. After unification, many people from southern Yemen felt marginalized from the country’s political and economic life. The long history of grievance and tensions that has translated into the creation of separatist movements might explain why “peaceful coexistence and the rejection of racism and sectarianism” was so important to participants from Aden governorate.

^[37] “Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen”, UNDP, April 22, 2019, https://www.undp.org/yemen/publications/assessing-impact-war-development-yemen?_gl=1%2A6hdhh1%2A_ga%2AMzlyMTEwNzQ4LjE2Njg5MzA4Njk.%2A_ga_TGHFVBQ9DR%2AMTY3NTEiMTkiNi40LjAuMTY3NTEiMTkiNi42MC4wLjA

^[38] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Ibb, March 3, 2022.

^[39] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana’a, March 1, 2022.

^[40] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[41] Ebtehal Al-Salehi, “Other Side of Aden,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, Policy Brief, March 27, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/the-other-side-of-aden/>



A young man looks at the historic Al-Qahira Citadel in Taiz city on July 18, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha.

Peace as Freedom of Expression and Movement

Among participants from Sana'a governorate, where restrictive measures on social conduct and mobility have increased under Houthi control,^[42] peace as freedom of expression and movement was more prominently voiced than in other governorates. "Without freedom, a person becomes trapped,"^[43] said a woman from Sana'a. Others voiced the challenges they face in freely expressing themselves due to the threat of them being viewed as siding with factions opposing the Houthi movement. The security situation in Houthi-controlled areas makes it difficult to openly talk about peace, a sentiment echoed in interviews with officials and community leaders. "Living in safety without fear is the right of Yemeni people," said a male participant from Sana'a. He added that bringing up the topic of peace can inflame tensions. "People become aggravated and say, 'what is this peace, this is surrender and not peace.'"^[44] In interviews with officials from Houthi-controlled areas, some leaders acknowledged peaceful values and coexistence as important aspects of peace, but their definition focused on patriotic aspects such as 'defending their values and country from external threats'. An official from Sana'a summarized his definition of peace as: "Peace is to be in your country, and safe from danger, and this requires that you have the strength with which to defend yourself and maintain true and just peace, whether it is internal peace or external peace, and therefore peace here is from a political perspective in the first place."^[45]

^[42] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sanaa, March 1, 2022.

^[43] Female participants in a focus group discussion in urban Sana'a, March 1, 2022.

^[44] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana'a, March 3, 2022.

^[45] Male official from Sana'a, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

Community leaders interviewed in Houthi-controlled areas complained about the opposition they face when seeking to promote peace with political and tribal leaders. One admitted he was baffled by how peaceful approaches in Yemen were only acknowledged in theory: “Yemeni society is strange. It accepts peace and peaceful coexistence on a theoretical level, but when you talk about the need to act on it, you find great opposition from everywhere.”^[46] Some noted how they have been prevented from preaching about peace in their sermons. Since the Houthi takeover of northwest Yemen, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (*Awqaf*) closely controls and monitors religious discourse, inspecting and approving preachers’ sermons before they are delivered. In the words of a mosque preacher from Sana’a, “the lack of opportunity for us sometimes to talk about a culture of peace contributes to restricting our ability to spread a culture of peace, as we are given sermons prepared by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.”^[47] Against this backdrop and a culture of fear that is being sown among Yemeni communities, respondents perceived the environment they live in as ‘not conducive to peace’ and where the freedom to talk about, let alone promote peace, is severely restricted.^[48]

Needs First Before Talk of Peace

Poverty levels in Yemen have drastically worsened since the war. The UNDP’s 2019 assessment observed in 2017 that 48 percent of the population lived on less than US\$ 1.90 a day and 78.5 percent lived on less than US\$ 3.20 a day.^[49] Public employees in Yemen have not received full and regular salaries since the fall of 2016, which in turn has had a detrimental impact on sectors such as health and education. The unmet basic needs of Yemenis dominated definitions of peace discussed with focus groups. Psychologist Abraham Maslow’s renowned human needs theory,^[50] at the core of which lies access to basic needs such as food, water, shelter, security, and safety, argues that before any other advanced needs are met, basic needs must be fulfilled first. Feedback given by Yemeni women and men consulted for this study reinforces Maslow’s argument. One respondent from Sana’a said, “basic necessities of life and livelihood are now the main concern in Yemen, and not peace, the culture of peace, the spreading of peace, or the concept of peace, meaning that it is not appropriate to talk about spreading peace and other concepts related to peace when most of the people are struggling to make ends meet.”^[51] The politicization of peace by the warring parties also explains many of the respondents’ aversion or sensitivity to discussions on peace.

References to basic needs were also more prevalent in responses from rural participants. A woman from rural Sana’a governorate said “peace is linked to the necessities of life and

^[46] A male mosque preacher, Ibb, semi-in-depth interview, January 2022.

^[47] A male mosque preacher, Sana’a, semi-in-depth interview, January 2022.

^[48] As a means of governing Sana’a and other areas under its control, the Houthi movement has a network that runs parallel with the government structure; the top Houthi authorities set the agenda on a day-to-day basis for all sectors of society which is then shared with a network of supervisors (*mushrifteen*) that interact with the public and manager general supervisors.

^[49] “Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen”, UNDP, April 22, 2019, https://www.undp.org/yemen/publications/assessing-impact-war-development-yemen?_gl=1%2AGhdhh1%2A_ga%2AMzfyMTEwNzQ4LjE2Njg5MzA4Njk.%2A_ga_TGHFVBQ9DR%2AMTY3NTEiMTk1Ni40LjAuMTY3NTEiMTk1Ni42MC4wLjA

^[50] Maslow, A. H., “A Dynamic Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396, 1943, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

^[51] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana’a, March 3, 2022.

livelihood, so I sleep, and I am reassured that I will have a gas cylinder [to cook and use], a decent life.”^[52] Urban-rural differences explain the socio-economic challenges faced by rural people in Yemen, disparities that can be observed in areas such as access to healthcare services and education. ^[53] The isolation of rural communities, owing to the mountainous topography of Yemen, often means a lack of qualified personnel such as doctors and teachers, which translates into more widespread illiteracy, poverty, and illness. Within this, women and girls are particularly vulnerable. In comparison to their urban counterparts, women living in rural areas get married earlier, have higher fertility rates, and suffer more maternal morbidity and mortality. As the backbone of agricultural work in Yemen, they are also burdened with heavy workloads since they are responsible for fetching water, fodder, and firewood as well as engaging in other agricultural duties.^[54]



^[52] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Sana’a, March 1, 2022.

^[53] Kawkab Alwadeai, “Rural Development is Key to Sustainable Peace in Yemen,” Yemen Policy Center, June 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/rural-development-is-key-to-sustainable-peace-in-yemen/>

^[54] Marta Colburn, “A New Path Forward: Empowering A Leadership Role for Yemeni Civil Society,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13021>

Peace is Coexistence, Peace is Islam

“Islam came with a message of peace [...] those who are aware of religion as well as its culture of peace, are more inclined to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way.”^[55]

Islam was an important lens through which Yemeni respondents articulated their definition of peace. Religion is deeply rooted in all aspects of Yemeni society and Islamic values were cited by participants as ones that emphasize coexistence, rejection of war and violence, and peaceful attitudes, behaviors, and values. Islamic values reinforce “a community environment that accepts different opinions and respects all members of society regardless of gender and customs and which reflect societal prosperity and community peace,”^[56] and teach about “love, harmony, and brotherhood [or sisterhood] between individuals in a community,”^[57] and involves “a set of patterns and behaviors that help provide stability to human life.”^[58] The conflict, however, has disrupted the peaceful tenets which participants stressed are intrinsic to Islamic values.

Among Yemeni communities, a rise in militarization and violence resulting from the war has meant that social cohesion is increasingly being threatened. In Aden, a focus group participant described how in his own village people have resorted to more violent behavior, especially after joining the military.^[59]

Youth recruitment into armed security forces or militias across Yemen has become widespread, in both Houthi-controlled areas and areas nominally under the internationally recognized government. Recent analysis of recruitment of young boys and men suggests that among some Yemeni youth, fighting has become preferable to studying and while some are joining for ideological reasons, others see joining militias as an easy way to earn an income for themselves and their families.^[60]

Peace is Dignity

Among some female respondents, definitions of peace were more personal and linked to dignity. A woman from rural Aden defined peace as something that comes from within, an inner peace that “begins and ends with the soul.”^[61] Another female respondent, linking peace to self-empowerment and exercising her human rights, said: “[...] I must be strong and impose my respect because no matter how I am [my physical condition], even if I am bedridden, no one has the right to bully me, and part of my rights is my dignity.”^[62]

^[55] Male participant in a focus group discussion urban Hadramawt, March 4, 2022.

^[56] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[57] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Ibb, March 5, 2022.

^[58] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 16, 2022.

^[59] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 16, 2022.

^[60] See, Boys Becoming Fighters: When the Only Future in Sight is the Frontline in Fawziah Al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett and Shams Shamsan, “A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experience of Yemen’s War,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/8480019>

^[61] Female participant in a focus group discussion in a rural area of Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[62] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

Prioritizing Human Security for Peace

The above understandings of peace voiced by the respondents shed light on the importance of human security. Feelings of insecurity arise from daily worries about income security, health security, environmental security and protection from crime among other concerns that can eventually lead to social disintegration.^[63] Human security is about protecting and empowering people over the security of the state. This paradigm shift is crucial as it recognizes that true peace can only be achieved when people go about their days feeling secure and able to meet their basic needs. Yemenis, who are currently in the midst of a grave humanitarian crisis, with countless lives lost due to the ongoing conflict, have been denied access to the most basic of needs such as food, healthcare, and infrastructure. If sustainable peace is to be achieved in Yemen, protecting individuals, including the most vulnerable, and prioritizing human security is key.

^[63] UNDP, Human Development Report 1994, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletenostatpdf.pdf>

4. YEMENI PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S ROLES AS PEACEBUILDERS

How do Yemeni communities perceive women's roles as peacebuilders? The following section outlines the predominant views on women as peacebuilders that emerged from the focus group discussions and from interviews with officials and community leaders.

Mothers as Primary Peacebuilders

“Peace begins in the homes, and if I care about raising my children, their values, and morals, I build an entity and a society that reflects their actions in it and on others.”^[64]

Many respondents viewed mothers as Yemeni society's primary peacebuilders; one female respondent voiced this sentiment, saying “the role of a woman in society is to raise a peaceful generation, as she is the first educator and the upholder of values of peace and love in children.”^[65] In the words of a male focus group participant from Ibb, “she is the pillar of peace, she is the mother, and she is the school that prepares the generation, the future generation we have in Yemen, as God wills for them.”^[66] Another male participant from Sana'a added that “peace begins with the mother in her home and through the proper upbringing of her children and the consolidation of the concepts and values of Islam that encourage brotherhood, love, peace, and acceptance of all others regardless of race, color, gender, or social class.”^[67]

Becoming a mother is an important life event that is recognized and highly honored in Yemen. A recent study into the life phases of a Yemeni woman noted that delivering a child is when Yemeni women are made to feel most valued by their husbands, family, community, and society.^[68] The study notes how mothers in Yemen play important roles in social relationships that extend to the family, tribe, and neighborhood. Moreover, the social capital wielded by mothers, whose decision-making role generally increases with age, plays a role in the well-being of children and, by proxy, that of their wider surroundings.^[69] For instance, the role of *munasabat* (Yemeni social gatherings), which frequently bring together mothers and Yemeni women during weddings, births, and deaths, provides the space for the exchange of goods and charity, but more importantly represents important building blocks for resilience, empowerment, and self-confidence among women.^[70]

^[64] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[65] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Ibb, March 5, 2022.

^[66] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Ibb, March 11, 2022.

^[67] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana'a, March 3, 2022.

^[68] Marta Colburn, “The Life Phases of a Yemeni Woman”, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 10, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13340>

^[69] Ibid. The author cites an anthropological study conducted with mothers in Taiz in the late 1980s. The study's findings show that a child's health was impacted by the general well-being of a mother, noting that a mother's disconnection from social life can have a negative impact on the well-being of her children, pointing to the importance of a mother's social capital and how it influences the surrounding environment.

^[70] Ibid.

Participants during the FGDs reinforced this thinking, noting how women spread and promote peace first starting from the home, and then extend it to the broader community, largely through “schools, places of education, and in women’s gatherings, through which it is possible for women to talk about and resolve problems.”^[71] A common perspective among male participants was that women, as mothers and wives, played reconciliatory roles at home when husbands, fathers, and sons quarreled, and would generally take them somewhere and calm them down to reconcile among them, rather than make the situation worse.



Across all focus groups, female respondents’ perceptions were often shaped by their caregiving role. Many stressed that regardless of whether they worked or were active in public life, the responsibility of caregiving was ultimately theirs. In the words of a woman from Hadramawt: “I see the role of women in all fields and disciplines, whether in civil society organizations or other sectors. But her [a woman’s] main role begins with the home and raising the children, even if the man [husband or father] accepts that she can work, she remains the primary supporter of the family.”^[72] On the other hand, male respondents did not perceive their roles as fathers (or other male relatives) as being associated with that of bringing up children, even if many of them viewed child rearing as a first step in building a peaceful society. The perception that it is women who bear the full responsibility of child-rearing was evident throughout discussions held with participants and consistent with prevailing gender norms in Yemen.

^[71] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

^[72] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 3, 2022

Using the lens of care to expand on the responses of the participants, mothers and members of society (male or female) who adopt non-violent approaches to raising children are more likely to instill children with similar ideals and who choose peaceful approaches to conflict. Care practices and caregiving associated with ‘mothering’ are argued to produce moral and political mindsets that are capable of challenging existing notions of social justice and militarism.^[73] Conversely, not all women and mothers espouse peaceful values, and instances of women propagating violence are emerging in Yemen. Some of the detrimental ways they have contributed to the war include mobilizing young boys as combatants – their sons or other women’s sons.^[74] Women have also joined the warring armed groups as combatants or members of intelligence networks.^[75] The UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen published a report in 2020 documenting 34 girls, aged 13-17, that were recruited by the Houthi movement between 2015-2020.^[76] They were assigned several roles such as medical and relief workers, spies, guards, and militants (also known as Zainabiyat—a women’s military group established by Houthis). Similarly, in areas under the internationally recognized government, there have been reports of the recruitment of women by the different warring factions. An official interviewed in Aden spoke of “women who have become extremists, meaning religious extremists, taking roles as religious preachers, supporting violence, weapons, and war. They revolt for the sake of their children; I mean for the sake of a livelihood.”^[77] These cases, however, appear to represent a minority. Overall, research suggests that the positive role of women with regard to peacebuilding far outweighs their roles as combatants of war.^[78]

^[73] Ibid.

^[74] Marie Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabad, “Women nowadays do anything: Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen”, June 2017, Saferworld, Carpo and YPC <https://www.escr-net.org/resources/women-peace-and-security-yemen>

^[75] Hadi Al-Mowafak, “Engaging Women in Yemen’s peace process requires better alliances”, Yemen Policy Center, October, 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/engaging-women-in-yemens-peace-process-requires-better-alliances-and-networks/>

^[76] “Report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen: Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014,” Human Rights Council Forty-Fifth session, 14 September–2 October 2020, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2037637/A_HRC_45_6_E.pdf

^[77] An male official, Aden, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

^[78] Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “The Role of Women Peacebuilding in Yemen,” February 2020, https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf



A mural in Aden on February 22, 2022, depicts women's efforts in the independence movement of southern Yemen // Sana'a Center photo Sam Tailing

Teachers' Role in Promoting Peace

“The first and basic role [of promoting peace] comes from the family and schools, and the mother has a primary role as well as the teacher, and the role of the teacher is an important and honorable one.”^[79]

Professions within the education sector were perceived by participants as acceptable and commendable roles for Yemeni women and suitable fields for promoting peace. Echoing other respondents in his focus group, a man from a rural area in Aden governorate said “a woman does not have the right to do the work of a man [...] we Yemenis accept that a woman can be a housewife, or work as a doctor, a nurse, or a teacher,”^[80] professions that are largely considered an extension of the private sphere and therefore suitable for women.

Alongside mothers, teachers were perceived as playing an important role in promoting peace and non-violence. A teacher working in the rural parts of Aden argued that schools are the first place to spread awareness of peace. Drawing from her own experience, she said “when I am free or if there is a free period, I hold peace and awareness-raising sessions for women and girls.”^[81]

A female teacher from urban Sana'a, however, voiced concern on how the war in Yemen has led to an increase in violent behavior among youth, mostly stemming from increased fear, insecurity, and instability. She said “violence in schools is increasing day by day, spreading a

^[79] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

^[80] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 16, 2022.

^[81] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 14, 2022.

culture of revenge among students.”^[82] In Ibb, male respondents noted how women were playing an important role in spreading messages of peace in educational establishments, such as universities, where they motivated students to distance themselves from religious extremism and partisanship.^[83] This they do in a context where young men and boys are increasingly dropping out of school to join armed groups. Lack of motivation for school was cited in a recent study as a bigger issue for boys than girls and linked to the fact that some young men see no point pursuing education when so many people in Yemen are either unemployed or not receiving salaries.^[84]



A female teacher at Al-Wehda Girls School in Taiz stands in front of the students at the morning assembly on August 24, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

Like mothers and caregivers, teachers who promote moral principles and non-violence practices are deemed as likely to educate a generation of youth with similar principles, but a clear prevalence of structural violence, stemming from the war, was widely cited as an obstacle to peace in many parts of Yemen. Educating teachers, both female and male, on how to teach peaceful values and practices while also combating the spread of violence in Yemen presents an important opportunity toward restoring a culture of peace.

^[82]Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sanaa, March 2, 2022.

^[83]Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Ibb, March 11, 2022.

^[84] Fawziah Al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett and Shams Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experience of Yemen's War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/8480019>

Mosques as Safe Spaces and Incubators for Peace

Mosques operate as communal places within the community for learning, community outreach, social activities, fundraising events, and political engagement and can therefore play a vital role in community participation and instilling a sense of community. Segregated spaces in mosques were deemed by female respondents as important places for women to promote peaceful values and behaviors, combat violence, and empower women. Many considered women's prayer rooms as a "safe place"^[85] where women "congregate and educate each other."^[86] Some also emphasized the role of mosque preachers in spreading peace and empowering women as peace agents, and then need to "involve imams of mosques in spreading the culture of peace through sermons and lectures, [and by] conducting workshops in the mosque about raising awareness on the importance of spreading peace."^[87]

Perceptions on Activism and Peacebuilding in the Public Sphere

Outside the confines of the private sphere, Yemeni women have been filling the gap left by the state by providing internally displaced Yemenis with food and lifesaving necessities, diverting youth away from violence, mediating the release of detainees, and ending armed conflicts over water and land resources.^[88] Solidarity networks and women-led organizations have been sprouting since the war and many are doing commendable work on the ground.^[89] The Abductees' Mothers Association, for example, is one of the most active organizations in Yemen that monitors, documents, and negotiates the exchange and release of abductees and detainees.^[90] Formed in Sana'a in 2016, it brings together mothers, sisters, wives, and other female relatives of abductees and detainees.^[91] Hadramawt Women for Peace is another example of a women-led organization that succeeded in advocating for the reopening of the local airport in the coastal city of Mukalla, which was closed in April 2015 after Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took over the city.^[92]

Many other women-led organizations and initiatives led by women exist in Yemen, but peace

^[85] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[86] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

^[87] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 16, 2022.

^[88] Muna Luqman, "Statement to the UN Security Council," Food 4 Humanity Foundation, April 15, 2019, <https://peacetrack.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/muna-luqman-unscc-statement-final-15-april-2019.pdf>

^[89] For a comprehensive review of women's work on the ground, 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

^[90] Similar associations by women have been created in the past. In Argentina in the 1970s, for instance, the military dictatorship was forcibly abducting people who were considered dissidents and those who dared to speak against the dictatorship, instilling fear and silencing people in the country. No one was brave enough to confront the tyranny except for a group of fourteen women—later known as the "Mothers of The Plaza de Mayo" or "Mothers of the Disappeared"—despite risks to their lives and family warnings, stepped up and confronted the dictatorship's actions. Driven not by a political agenda but genuine concern for their family, the group inspired many others to come forth and protest human rights violations. See, Lester Kurtz, "The Mothers of the Disappeared: Challenging the Junta in Argentina (1977-1983)," International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), July 2010, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/mothers-disappeared-challenging-junta-argentina-1977-1983/>

^[91] Fatima Mutaher, "New Networks in Women's Peacebuilding," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 15, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15282>

^[92] "Women Peacebuilders in Yemen advocate for the re-opening of Al-Rayyan Airport," National Democratic Institute, June 11, 2019, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/women-peacebuilders-yemen-advocate-re-opening-al-riyyan-airport>

activism for women comes with its perils. In Houthi-controlled areas, authorities have put many regulations in place that limit women's engagement in the public sphere; women's empowerment projects and initiatives are prohibited, and women activists' movements are being controlled through regulations such as the requirement of a male guardian (*mahram*) for travel within or outside Yemen.^[93] Civil society organizations have consequently seen a sharp decline in their programs and activities since the onset of the conflict due to harassment and threats by the Houthi movement. Activists and employees in civil society organizations working in the human rights sector have faced threats and extortions because of their line of work.^[94]

The focus group discussions also revealed that women publicly active in peacebuilding also face social stigma. Mixed perceptions were voiced by both men and women regarding women's engagement in peace activities. Some were supportive of their role "provided that the topic or initiative matter does not conflict with Islamic legal texts and does not conflict with the values and societal norms that people are accustomed to."^[95] Others said that female peace activists were not representative of Yemeni culture, which contributed negatively to women's peacebuilding work, noting that "there is an inferior view of women who work in peace and in society in general, so women don't accept to work in peace."^[96] Such sentiment was also echoed in interviews with community leaders who intimated that women naively accept Western concepts without critical thinking. A community leader from Hadramawt, whilst commending the role of peace activists, said "women are not always bright", and that when engaging with civil society organizations or attending meetings held by women, he noticed how "they are dictated to, whether by international organizations or local organizations," and that they accept being influenced when raising specific issues to the community.^[97]

^[93] Safer World, "War isn't the only threat to women's activism in Yemen", February 21, 2022, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/983-war-isn-at-the-only-threat-to-women-as-activism-in-yemena>

^[94] An example is that of Laila Al-Thawr, a social activist that negotiated the release of hundreds of prisoners of war through a self-funded initiative in 2015, but in 2018, following a Facebook post she had made reproving the Houthi movement of their activities—raids of shops, seizing of private properties among others—she was indicted as a member of a "sleep cell", forcing her to flee the country in fear for her life. See Maha Awadh and Nuria Shuja'adeen, "Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen", UN Women, January 2019, <https://yemen.un.org/en/15853-women-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-yemen>

^[95] A male mosque preacher, Hadramawt, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022

^[96] Women articulated themselves as reflecting different identities and interests, including regional and ideological diversities. The fact that some female respondents held negative views of female activists is important to note, demonstrating the fact that women are not a homogenous entity and that treating them as a uniform category can only do more harm than good.

^[97] A male mosque preacher and community leader, Hadramawt, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

5. DAILY PRACTICES THAT LEAD TO SOCIAL COHESION

The following section gives an overview of daily accounts of women building peace on the ground, including examples of practices of conflict resolution and economic and religious empowerment, and different forms of resistance against rigid norms that have contributed to shifts in society.

Tradition in Conflict Resolution Practices

As demonstrated in the previous section, spaces where women carry out their day-to-day activities prove to be important catalysts for empowerment but also for conflict resolution practices. In Hadramawt, focus group discussants noted how women have traditionally played reconciliatory roles. In the Al-Shaheed, Al-Salam, Al-Hara, and Al-Khalaf neighborhoods of Mukalla, for instance, focus group participants cited numerous examples of how women have been resolving conflicts. Discussants noted how unlike foreign aid projects, where peacebuilding activities are often short term, traditions of conflict resolution are embedded in Yemeni culture. Primarily, conflict resolution in Yemen is practiced widely within the family unit. Yemeni families are traditionally large and family disputes are often the first conflicts women handle.^[98] During the FGDs, both male and female respondents perceived women as catalysts of peace when conflict arises within the family. Women were said to “reconcile between [men] ... when they quarrel with other men in the neighborhood,”^[99] and play a key role in reconciliation between couples and in “convincing men to reconsider divorce,” or “solving conflict between families.”^[100] One participant specifically attributed these qualities to Bedouin women.^[101] Feedback from the focus group discussions indicated that women’s mediation roles were highly valued in Yemeni communities. In Mukalla, for instance, a school was named after a woman renowned among her community for raising orphans and solving community problems.

^[98] Ibid.

^[99] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

^[100] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

^[101] Historically, bedouin women did not follow the same standard of modesty as settled women, who were described by a scholar who wrote on Hadramawt between the 1880s and 1930s as “heavily adorned, they traveled about freely with their flocks, which was deemed unseemly behavior for women of other groups.” In the 20th century, however, many bedouin tribes adopted more settled ways of life. Linda Boxberg Linda, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadramawt, Emigration and the Indian Ocean, 1880s-1930s*, State of University of New York Press, 2022, as cited in Marta Colburn, “A New Path Forward: Empowering A Leadership Role for Yemeni Civil Society,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13021>



A rural woman in Bab Al-Kabeer market in Taiz on December 15, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

The role of women as mediators, although not widely documented, is recognized among tribes. A recent study on women in non-traditional roles in tribal societies notes how tribal customs in Yemen grant women advantages that they can use to stop violence and prevent fighting.^[102] The principle of weakness can serve as a protective factor for women, contributing to their role in keeping the peace between divided communities.^[103]

Tribal customs, for instance, prohibit targeting a man who is accompanied by a woman, even if he has committed murder, and a wanted man may seek the protection of women until the issue is resolved. Women thus work behind the scenes, pressuring men to accept peace, de-escalate problems, accept solutions, and make concessions. One participant noted that this process “often happens at home rather than during meetings, which are often dominated by men.”^[104]

Among religious leaders interviewed, the role of women in mediation was equally recognized. In Sana'a governorate, one religious leader narrated how women in his own community play a crucial role in mediation, especially in secluded areas where communities are fearful of outsiders. He told one story of two women who helped initiate the creation of a social fund in an area that men from another community were unable to access due to the closed nature of the village. In his words, “we decided to start involving women in projects like that [...] the women gained the trust of the villagers, so they provided the women with all the information and data required to help in implementing the project that would benefit the village.”^[105]

^[102] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022

^[103] Maha Awadh and Nuria Shuja'Adeen, “Women in Conflict Resolution and Engagement Peacebuilding in Yemen”, UN Women, January 2019, <https://yemen.un.org/en/15853-women-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-yemen>

^[104] 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

^[105] A male religious actor, Sana'a, semi-in-depth interview, January 2022.

Economic Engagement as Empowerment

“[W]omen fight against poverty through simple craftsmanship that contributes to our household income and helps keep our sons or daughters in school, which I consider a contribution to spreading peace.”^[106]

For some women, new opportunities that have emerged from the crisis have been empowering. Financial necessity due to economic collapse has resulted in women’s growing participation in the labor market, as many men have joined the fighting or lost their livelihoods. A woman from Aden explained that before the war, women were mostly confined to their roles at home, or worked in specific industries, but nowadays women “do all kinds of jobs” with fewer restrictions. She believed that it had become acceptable for women to work in many professions and that women’s roles in the public sphere have increased. Recent reports reinforce this view, noting that more women are establishing small businesses and even seeking employment in previously male-dominated industries such as retail and some service sectors.^[107] The humanitarian response has also created new employment opportunities for a small but growing number of urban young women who are taking on leadership roles in international organizations, the private sector, and local non-governmental organizations.^[108]



A woman prepares a design for a laser printer at her home workshop in Aden on August 4, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ammar Khalaf

^[106] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[107] Fawziah Al-Ammar and Hannah Patchett, “The Repercussions of War on Women in The Yemen Workforce,” Rethinking Yemen’s Economy Policy brief, July 23, 2019, https://devchampions.org/uploads/publications/files/Rethinking_Yemens_Economy-policy_brief_13.pdf

^[108] Marta Colburn, “A New Path Forward: Empowering A Leadership Role for Yemeni Civil Society,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 26, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13021>

These are important developments to note and match global trends in conflict situations where the shortage of male labor due to combat, displacement, or migration can at times increase opportunities for women to engage in paid work, including in sectors that are not traditionally open to women.^[109] Yet, not all women are benefiting from this opening created by the war. Reports suggest that many women have resorted to low-paid, informal physical labor, such as domestic work or begging, to make ends meet.^[110] In the focus group discussions, the fact that conflict has added a huge burden on women was frequently voiced by both male and female respondents. For most women in the FGDs, however, employment opportunities were seen as empowering. Women who work are more integrated into their communities and have more influence, said one participant from Aden.^[111] A woman from a rural area of Aden who started selling incense, henna, and beautification products agreed, saying “my life before I started work was boring and I did not feel that important. Now the situation has changed, and I have a role supporting my family.”^[112]

Structural barriers that limit women’s labor force participation remain. Women typically require training and capacity-building to access certain types of employment, including support for establishing and managing home-based businesses, which have proven crucial contributors to women’s financial independence, self-empowerment, and improved livelihoods. Income-earning initiatives, however, often reinforce traditional gender roles by focusing on and providing training in skills such as incense-making, hairdressing, and sewing, all of which are markets that are already saturated.^[113] In addition, although the war has provided some women with opportunities and access to the labor market, there are still many obstacles to their enhanced economic participation, including restrictions that are currently being imposed on women, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas.

^[109] International Labour Organization, “Gender Equality and women’s empowerment in the world of work in fragile, conflict and disaster settings,” March 21, 2022, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-promotion/recovery-and-reconstruction/WCMS_840082/lang--en/index.htm

^[110] 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>

^[111] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Aden, March 3, 2022.

^[112] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[113] Some local and international organizations are providing training in entrepreneurship skills and development, and supporting women entrepreneurs with funding and interest-free loans to establish or grow their small businesses and projects. The Marib Girls Foundation is an example of a local organization that has been providing training for women entrepreneurs who lack small business management skills and experience through the Saba Project for the Economic Empowerment of Yemeni Women, funded by Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY). See, Abdulhadi Habtor, “Saba Project for the Economic Empowerment of Yemeni Women Launches 60 Programs”, Asharq al-Awsat, March 8, 2022, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3518426/saba-project-economic-empowerment-yemeni-women-launches-60-programs>

Resistance Against Rigid Norms and Male Support

“I was seeking divorce and my family, especially my mother, were strongly against it because a woman getting divorced is perceived as a shameful thing in society. But I persevered and continued the legal process until my family eventually accepted it.”^[114]

Several stories of resilience and resistance were narrated by female respondents throughout the focus group discussions. These included ones from women seeking divorce, ones prevented from working, others who wanted to pursue professions deemed inappropriate, and ones where male family members played either hindering or supportive roles. Many of these represented examples of resistance against social norms and customs that attempt to quell women’s decision-making power and participation in public life. A woman from Aden recalled how, when she tried to create art at home, her conservative brother destroyed her artwork and beat her. He then married her off to someone 30 years older than her in the hope of her stopping her art, but her husband in the end became her biggest supporter. In her own words, “he even held exhibitions for me until I became successful and active in my community.”^[115] In Aden, a participant recounted the story of a father whose daughters entered the police college even though their community stood against them. The girls eventually became very active in helping their community and role models for others. During a Friday prayer, “the religious leader made a sermon in front of the whole mosque in their honor, commending their contribution to the civil protection of society.”^[116]

Often, the stories shared by Yemeni women during the FGDs started with them facing huge obstacles to carving a role in public life, but gradually the behavior of their male relatives changed. A woman from Hadramawt, who was met with disapproval by her brother and his friends when she started working in an office, eventually witnessed a change in her brother’s mindset. “Sometimes it is the woman who has to change people’s minds in the end, and male relatives will change their minds if we persevere because they will hear good things about us from others and see the importance of our work. I was able to prove my brother wrong, and now, praise be to God, he is my biggest supporter,” she said.^[117] The FGDs revealed that tangible change depended considerably on the behavior of male members of the family and whether they supported women in defying cultural norms.

^[114] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Aden, March 3, 2022.

^[115] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Aden, March 3, 2022.

^[116] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Aden, March 3, 2022.

^[117] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

6. YEMENI PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES FACED BY PEACEBUILDERS

The following section highlights the obstacles faced by women in peacebuilding efforts, as conveyed by focus group participants, and officials and community leaders interviewed. It also proposes solutions put forward by Yemeni women and men.

Customs and Traditions that Work Against Women Peacebuilders

“We know Yemeni society is a conservative one, and what it means is strictness in women’s affairs. This restricts women from going out of the house, expressing her opinion, and raising her voice [...] these are traditions and customs that have been attached to religion and have become misunderstood as part of Islam.”^[118]

Gendered norms and traditions in Yemen shape how communities perceive women and their role in peacebuilding. Women’s mobility is often limited, since family members, especially males, ultimately have the right to control their movements, restricting engagement in the public sphere, including economic participation or public roles in peacebuilding, “[A woman] is required to fulfill her roles at home, and if she returns home late because of her work, then she will be blamed, for even if her family accepts the nature of her work itself, they will not accept returning home late,” according to a female participant from rural Hadramawt.^[119] Some respondents noted how “the masculinity of society [patriarchy] excluded women from participation” as do customs and traditions that restrain the role of women, even at the family level.^[120] Others cited “ignorance, lack of education, and the spread of illiteracy in Yemeni society in general and in women in particular”^[121] as a hindrance to more prominent roles in public life.

^[118] A male mosque preacher, Hadramawt, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

^[119] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

^[120] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[121] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Sana’a, March 4, 2022.



A woman and her child pass by a building destroyed during the war in Al-Jahmaliya neighborhood in Taiz city on December 12, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

Restrictions imposed on women based on rigid gender norms are used to maintain women's subordinate position in Yemeni society. In the words of a male participant from Sana'a, local customs "put women in a narrow area [assigned specific roles] that they cannot get out of, [with the mindset that] women are [inferior to men] and are not able to do anything."^[122] Others stated that intrinsic gender inequalities will determine the impact of women's work, noting how existing pioneers who work in organizations promoting peace end up cutting careers short to get married or if their husband opposes their work in peacebuilding.^[123] Support from male members of the family often defines how actively they can engage in the public sphere: "when there is a man who supports the woman, there is a difference,"^[124] said a participant from rural Hadramawt. Male relatives who are supportive of women's work also face risks such as ostracism and violence. To address societal challenges faced by families supportive of women, participants voiced the need to raise awareness among men and boys in community spaces — home, schools, mosques, and other public spaces, as well in media — of peace and gender inequalities. Another approach recommended was to engage influential social figures in promoting peace and a positive image of working women in Yemeni society.^[125]

The onset of the conflict has added additional layers of vulnerability for women. In Sana'a, men interviewed observed a culture of bullying of women who dare enter spaces that are traditionally reserved for men. A male respondent from Sana'a noted how a perceived lack of confidence "provides opportunities for men to bully and marginalize them [women] as well

^[122] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Sana'a, March 4, 2022.

^[123] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[124] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[125] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Ibb, March 3, 2022.

as limit their roles in spreading a culture of peace and society as a whole.”^[126] Other cited examples of bullying behavior were frequent defamation campaigns against women working in peacebuilding, which in both Houthi-controlled areas and areas under the internationally recognized government, are often conducted through social media.^[127] An official from Aden described how political and warring parties, via their large media presence, discredit women promoting or working in the field of peacebuilding, whether in Aden or elsewhere. This, the Adeni official argued, is the biggest hurdle inhibiting female peacemakers and peace advocates. He added, “when training workshops, conferences, or workshops are held with women participating, then you will find the next day campaigns of distortion and treason targeting these women, which harm their reputation and paint them as unpatriotic.”^[128]

Peacebuilding Work Seen as a ‘Western Concept’

“Peace in Yemen, as of today, has been turned into a Western concept, and this is what hinders people who call for peace as a societal process. They have forgotten that our Islamic religion preceded the West [in spreading and promoting peace], and they do not talk about peace in relation to Islam.”^[129]

Terms like ‘peace’ or ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘gender equality’ are largely perceived as Western concepts in Yemeni society, which inevitably hinders the work of people and organizations that call for the promotion of peace. Many contend instead that peace comes from the teachings of Islam and authentic Arab culture, and signifies coexistence, respect for others, and spreading awareness, not only against war.^[130] A male participant from Hadramawt emphasized the need to consider customs and traditions when promoting a culture of peace and women’s participation in spreading peace: “the sensitivity of society’s culture must also be understood and gradually sensitized. The cultural values [in different parts of Yemen] should not be ignored when implementing peace initiatives and activities.”^[131]

The association of peace with Western agendas was also voiced in some of the interviews with religious leaders, who acknowledged the importance of spreading peace and a culture of peace in Yemeni society but who were skeptical of or completely rejected (in Sana’a and Ibb in particular) the role of international organizations in spreading peace on the ground. In Hadramawt and Aden, mosque preachers and religious figures were also distrusting of the work of international organizations, although they were open to supporting them if they align with the principles of Islam and Islamic rulings. In Ibb, a mosque preacher explained that the culture of peace is one in line with the values of Islam. He argued that the West

^[126] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Sana’a, March 4, 2022.

^[127] Both traditional media and social media were cited by several participants as important tools that can be used to promote peace and women’s roles in peacebuilding.

^[128] Male official, Aden, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

^[129] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana’a, March 3, 2022.

^[130] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

^[131] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

and international organizations who call for spreading peace have no credibility among the people, noting that the United Nations “talks and calls for peace, but they are far from it,” and, rather than peace, aim for “what they want and what serves their interests.”^[132] Citing long-standing failures in development projects in Yemen, a female participant from rural Aden added that interventions should focus on being locally driven but also long term: “intervention of organizations must be tangible, not just one or two sessions. We need real projects that represent the reality we live in.”^[133]

Shifting the focus from a Western-centric peacebuilding approach toward a locally driven one underpinned many of the solutions proposed by respondents, pointing to the need for women to be given agency and control over their lives, and be able to contextualize understandings and definitions of peace so that it makes sense in their own language and context.

Religious Discourse that Incites Against Women

“Yemen now is a playground for regional war, meaning religious extremism has reached its climax in Yemen. I mean, one party says these [people are] Shias and infidels, and the other party says the same thing. Religion is being exploited by all the conflicting parties in Yemen, whether in the North or in the South. This extreme form of religious extremism will not allow women to be advocates of peace.”^[134]

Restrictive measures imposed on women are characterized by conservatism and religious extremism, which in turn has an impact on a myriad of constraints. Participants listed travel and the necessity of having a mahram, the need to maintain gender segregation, the impossibility of spending late hours at work, innate skepticism of women working in the promotion of peace, misleading religious discourse by some sheikhs, and weak support provided by the family as just some of the restrictions put on women under conservative interpretations of Islam.

Some male participants noted that they have witnessed cases of religious leaders inciting against women in mosques and encouraging men to maintain women’s roles within the home. Respondents, among whom were men, called for “silencing the voices that call for limiting the role of women through dialogue and negotiation, and relying on religious evidence and arguments [to counter them].”^[135] Some men from rural and urban Hadramawt, as well as ones from Ibb and Aden, agreed that some religious discourse incites against women and their roles in society, and this, they claim, is because of “the weakness of religious awareness and its deviation from its right and moderate path.”^[136]

^[132] A male mosque preacher, Ibb, semi-in-depth interview, January 30, 2022.

^[133] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Aden, March 14, 2022.

^[134] Male official, Aden, semi-in-depth interview, February 2022.

^[135] Male participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 3, 2022.

^[136] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

Suggested approaches to counter negative religious incitement against women included state monitoring of religious discourse and empowering ministries to curb and determine misinformation.^[137] Also suggested was obliging “clerics and preachers to address the concepts of peace, and peacebuilding requirements in society, as an important step among the tasks of spreading a culture of peace.”^[138]



A woman carries a cooking gas cylinder over her head in Al-Dhabab district, west of Taiz city, on February 3, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

While misconstrued interpretations of Islam were said to oppress women, many women felt that if channeled in the right direction, religious discourse could be empowering. Female Islamic preachers, called daiya in Yemen, were mentioned as playing an important role in empowering women through religious arguments, using examples of the influential roles played by women throughout Islamic history to challenge gender inequalities. According to some female Islamic scholars, Muslim women have played various roles throughout history as leaders, scholars, and even military advisors, and owned assets and property.^[139] In Hadramawt, a woman said she attended an Islamic lecture where a woman came to the religious clergy for advice on how to deal with her husband who beats her every day. The religious clergy advised her to be patient and raise her children, do her prayers, and pray for her husband. A female religious leader, however, urged the woman not to ignore her rights, go to the police station to report him, and not let him hit her again because violence against women is against Islamic teachings.”^[140]

^[137] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

^[138] Male participant in a focus group discussion in urban Sana'a, March 3, 2022.

^[139] Fred Strasser, “Islam, Culture and Sexism: Making Change with Religious Learning,” The United States Institute of Peace, November 3, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/11/islam-culture-and-sexism-making-change-religious-learning>

^[140] Female participant in a focus group discussion in rural Hadramawt, March 2, 2022.

Another woman from Hadramawt, referring to advocating for equity in employment, said, “I spoke on the level of religious discourse that there should not be a big gap between men’s and women’s areas of work. There is nothing in religion that prevents women from working [...] there are many role models in Islamic history that tell us about Muslim women who worked in diverse fields.”^[141]

Frustration with the misconstruing of Islam and recognition of its fundamentally peaceful origin was voiced by many respondents. A woman from Hadramawt noted how society is unaware of the historical representation of women’s participation in peace in Islam. “It is a culture of peace, and I am aware of it, but many of the clergy do not understand the culture of peace or the importance of empowering women in our society.”^[142] Sheikhs, clerics, religious leaders, and community leaders were viewed by respondents as holding the key to changing societal attitudes toward women and for mitigating discriminatory practices that are particularly harmful. Many cited awareness campaigns targeting religious leaders and providing training based on religious discourse as an entry point to the role of women working in the field of peace.



An elderly woman wearing a traditional costume (setara) in the Old City of Sana'a on February 8, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Asem Al Posi

The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) guideline for engaging with religious leaders and faith-based organizations cites the benefits of such an approach. Some studies carried out in the Arab region have also shown that the WPS agenda itself may benefit from engaging religious leaders; they can promote WPS values and support the four pillars of the agenda.

^[141] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

^[142] Female participant in a focus group discussion in urban Hadramawt, March 5, 2022.

This is particularly relevant when testimonies of Yemeni women and men, dubious of the work of international organizations, abound. This localized approach could be more appealing to local communities that are skeptical or unconvinced of the WPS agenda. Regional examples of such work pay heed to how religion and the empowerment of women in religious discourse can enable rather than suppress women. Azizah al-Hibri, a female Islamic scholar and founder of an organization in Lebanon, *Karamah* (dignity), made big strides in raising awareness among Muslim women on their rights and empowering them with a solid foundation of Islamic law to be able to challenge male domination using an agreed-upon belief system. The *Karamah* model has been applied worldwide and has shown results in Yemen too.^[143] Even though the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding has received more attention in recent years,^[144] the way in which religion and religious leaders can bolster women's participation in peacebuilding has not been adequately researched. Findings from this research would suggest that when applied to a Yemeni context, peacebuilding approaches that take into account the role of religion and religious discourse are more likely to have a meaningful impact.

^[143] Manal Omar, who leads the Middle East North Africa Center (MENA) ,applied the *Karamah* model with a group of women activists in the former South Yemen. They were working to raise the legal age of marriage but were unable to get the needed support from religious clerics to support adopting a law. This was because of the ambiguity surrounding the word 'early' in describing the marriage of adolescent girls, which meant that multiple religious court rulings were required. But because the women were knowledgeable about Islamic principles, such as ones preventing harmful practices in society, they shifted the focus from the word 'early' to 'safe', in reference to the severe impact of childbearing on adolescent girls. As a result, they were able to raise the age of marriage to 16 years for girls in South Yemen prior to unification. See Fred Strasser Islam, "Culture and Sexism: Making Change with Religious Learning," United States Institute of Peace, November 3, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/11/islam-culture-and-sexism-making-change-religious-learning>

^[144] Marshall, K et al., "Women in Religious Peacebuilding," The United States Institute of Peace, May 16, 2011, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/05/women-religious-peacebuilding>

7. CONCLUSION

Regardless of their gender, background, or geographical location, participants consulted throughout the course of this research agreed that women play a critical role in peacebuilding. The majority, however, associated this role with the confines of the private sphere (the home), primarily as mothers (revered as society's primary peacebuilders, responsible for raising peaceful generations, and maintaining social cohesion) or in realms deemed as extensions of the private sphere (i.e., schools, mosques, and female gatherings) that constitute important spaces for empowerment and self-confidence among women. Among officials and community leaders interviewed, the overriding perception of female peacebuilders was that a woman is first and foremost responsible for the upbringing of children, and through this role responsible for promoting peaceful values.

Most officials interviewed held no objection to women publicly engaging in activism and peacebuilding work, provided that their work did not conflict with the traditional values and social norms of Yemeni society. The focus group discussions, however, revealed that women publicly active in peacebuilding in Yemen do face social stigma, a perception held by both men and women, with some women stating that female peace activists did not necessarily represent them. Widely reported smear campaigns and harassment of female peace activists in both Houthi-controlled territories and areas under the internationally recognized government would suggest that there is strong resistance against women publicly engaging in peacebuilding. The war has created enabling conditions for such harmful practices, in the name of customs and traditions, and for a culture of impunity to prevail.

Across the board, research participants claimed that peace in Yemen has been deeply politicized by the different warring parties, which have monopolized conversations on peace. The study's findings suggest that terms like 'peace' or 'peacebuilding' are often perceived as Western concepts, which hinders the work of organizations and individuals calling for peace. Women engaged in such work are vulnerable to intimidation, owing to prevailing strict gender norms and the perception among some that women "naively" accept the dictates of international and local organizations promoting peace. The association of peace with Western agendas was also voiced in interviews with officials and community leaders who were skeptical or completely rejected the role of international organizations in spreading peace on the ground (in Sana'a and Ibb in particular). In Hadramawt and Aden, mosque preachers and religious figures were also distrusting of the work of international organizations, although they were more open to supporting them under certain conditions.

Although Yemen's cultural norms and societal beliefs largely restrict women from participating in the public sphere, this study contends that in their daily lives women negotiate inequalities, mediate family and community conflict, navigate insecurity, and practice daily resistance and resilience. It argues that the undeniable contribution that women make toward day-to-day survival in their communities must be better recognized. Although this is largely done within private spaces more so than public ones predominantly occupied by men, integration

of their daily practices into peacebuilding frameworks would enhance current peace efforts, supporting conclusions made by other studies suggesting that women's participation in peacebuilding does not need to only originate at the top, but can be first integrated at the local level and then scaled up.^[145]

At the grassroots level, respondents cited many examples of women mediating disputes, a tradition embedded in Yemeni culture that views women as catalysts of peace when conflict arises. While the war has led to a worsening of gender relations at the level of political participation, Yemen's economic collapse and the shortage of male labor due to combat or death are seemingly increasing opportunities for women to engage in employment. Although such opportunities do not always come with equal terms or social protection, most female respondents viewed their engagement in employment as empowering. Given the link between women's empowerment in the world of work and sustainable development and peace,^[146] such shifts resulting from the war are important developments to monitor. Women also cited male support – especially from fathers, brothers, and husbands – as determinants of how actively they can engage in the public sphere.

Finally, religion as deeply rooted in all aspects of Yemeni society was a central aspect through which participants defined their understanding of peace and peacebuilding, and within that, the role of women. Religion was found to be both empowering and oppressive. Many cited restrictions on travel, the necessity of having a mahram, the need to maintain gender segregation, the impossibility of spending late hours at work, innate skepticism of women working in the promotion of peace, misleading religious discourse by some sheikhs, and weak support provided by the family as just some of the restrictions imposed on women according to extremist and conservative interpretations of Islam.

While misconstrued interpretations of Islam were said to oppress women, many women felt that religious discourse, when channeled in the right direction, could be empowering. Female Islamic preachers in Yemen, for instance, were viewed as important actors in empowering women through religious arguments and equipping them with strong foundations in Islamic law to be able to counter extremist narratives. Overall, participants felt that along with male support at the family level, sheikhs, clerics, and community leaders held the key to changing society's attitudes toward women and could play an important role in mitigating harmful practices stemming from the spread of increasingly extreme religious ideologies. Even though the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding has received more attention in recent years,^[147] the way in which religion and religious leaders can bolster women's participation in peacebuilding has not been adequately researched. Applied to a Yemeni context, such a localized approach could prove more appealing to local communities that are skeptical of current peace frameworks in Yemen.

^[145] Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Role of Women Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO, February 27, 2020, https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf

^[146] International Labour Organization, "Gender Equality and women's empowerment in the world of work in fragile, conflict and disaster settings," March 21, 2022, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-promotion/recovery-and-reconstruction/WCMS_840082/lang-en/index.htm

^[147] Marshall, K et al., "Women in Religious Peacebuilding," United States Institute of Peace, May 16, 2011, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/05/women-religious-peacebuilding>

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered as a guide for both domestic and international stakeholders to encourage a more inclusive and bottom-up approach to peacebuilding and encourage better integration of women's daily peacebuilding practices in larger peace frameworks.

To the International Community, OSESGY, and Local Actors:

- **Recognize human security as an integral component of peacebuilding.**
 - Support peacebuilding efforts that prioritize human security, including measures that address the root causes of conflict and promote social cohesion and reconciliation.
 - Increase funds for rural areas, where poverty levels are higher, to help Yemenis meet basic needs with a focus on food security, access to healthcare, and the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure.
 - Identify and address the different needs of women and men in rural areas and implement projects that focus on education and vocational training which can empower rural people in Yemen.
 - Reduce the burden of agricultural work on rural women and girls by implementing initiatives that improve farming technology in Yemen and by providing access to clean water sources.
- **Empower grassroots women in Yemen by recognizing their everyday practices in peacebuilding.**
 - Recognize, document, and integrate women's lived experiences and everyday practices at the grassroots level that contribute to social cohesion (conflict mediation, care work, and economic participation).
 - Invest in projects and research that reflect power dynamics in the family, community, and society using an intersectional approach to identify the complex levels of oppression that interact and intersect across gender, class, tribes, religious sects, regional divisions, and geographical areas in Yemen.
 - Support existing local projects and fund new ones, particularly in rural areas, that aim at promoting peace within identified community spaces where women gather.
 - Ensure diverse voices of women are integrated in the peace process, including rural and urban women, women with high and low levels of education, those on the ground and diasporas, and women from different geographical regions of Yemen, maintaining a balance between those who have access to policy making circles and those who find themselves on the margins.

- Empower women in their roles as caregivers and teachers to raise their status in the local community.
- **Engage men as partners and advocates for female peacebuilders.**
 - Design and implement programs that engage male members of the family and male local community leaders to raise awareness around the cultural, political, and psychological barriers that hinder women's full participation in the community, and the contribution of women in peacebuilding.
 - Consider launching a public campaign that celebrates the role of both men and women contributing to peacebuilding in Yemen, highlighting the different ways in which they contribute to peace at the local level.
- **Localize peacebuilding initiatives by building on Yemenis' own definitions of peace and approaches to peacebuilding.**
 - Encourage women, men, and local groups to utilize their language, define terminologies within the WPS agenda using cultural understandings, and identify their concerns, needs, and issues of priority when promoting peace and women's empowerment at the local level.
 - Fund projects and initiatives at the grassroots level in urban and rural areas that promote peace and a culture of peace based on the local definitions uncovered in this study— coexistence, peaceful behaviors, attitudes, and values, the renunciation of war, and reconciliation among conflicting groups.
 - Provide support and funding to NGOs, women's rights organizations, and local actors to conduct long-term community-based projects on peace education, gender equality, and social justice across urban and rural parts of Yemen.
 - Consult and integrate grassroots women's groups and actors to ensure their concerns, needs, and priorities are considered in peacebuilding efforts.
 - Avoid imposing agendas and priorities on peace programming and implement projects recommended by women on the ground.
- **Enforce laws to protect activists and peacebuilders in Yemen.**
 - Pressure the internationally recognized government to implement laws that punish inciteful language against women and safeguard women's right of movement, work and safety.
 - Exert concerted pressure on the Houthi authorities to retract on policies that work against women's rights including restrictions on their mobility; inciteful rhetoric (religious and cultural); violence against women (psychological, financial, or physical) and intimidation of women working in the field of peace.

- **Collaborate with local and national organizations to raise awareness on peace projects and peacebuilding work on the ground with the goal of building trust with local communities who are increasingly skeptical of peacebuilding work.**
 - Implement awareness campaigns within community spaces that increase understanding of peacebuilding projects in collaboration with local actors to mitigate their negative image and reputation associated with working in the field of peace and highlight the impact of peace projects in the community. This approach will raise awareness of peace work and women's impact so that male family members do not prevent women from working in peace-related activities.
- **Engage religious and community leaders in women's empowerment for peace.**
 - Engage with religious leaders and influential figures (such as tribal leaders, village heads, and community leaders) in the designing of peacebuilding projects that promote women's role, ensuring the utilization of a culturally-sensitive approach.
 - Bring influential figures in Yemen into discussions with respected local women actors and local groups to adapt WPS pillars to cultural and religious frameworks in Yemen.
 - Provide capacity building on the WPS agenda to male and female religious leaders and partner with them to identify the best approaches to interpret WPS concepts according to religious values that will increase trust within local communities.
 - Invest in research on the roles and benefits of engaging female religious preachers and clerics in promoting peace and empowering women.
 - Actively engage religious leaders and preachers, as influential figures within their communities, to increase the acceptance of peacebuilding and gender equality projects.
 - Support religious leaders exploring counternarratives and interpretations of Islamic texts that underline respect and compassion, highlight women's important role in society, and denounce violence against women.
 - Ensure an inclusive and intersectional approach of engaging women and women religious preachers in supporting the WPS agenda and informing peace programming and intervention mechanisms in Yemen.

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