

## Update on women, peace and security in Yemen March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021<sup>1</sup>

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The Informal Experts Group of the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security discussed the situation in Yemen in March 2017 ([S/2017/627](#)), November 2017 ([S/2017/1040](#)) and March 2019 ([S/2019/253](#)). This update summarizes relevant developments since then.

### Developments in the Security Council

In its **presidential statement** (PRST 2019/9) adopted on 29 August 2019, **the Security Council** recognized the crucial peacebuilding role played by women in Yemen, reiterated the importance of the full, effective and meaningful participation of women in the political process and **called on the parties to increase the participation of women in their delegations to 30 percent**, if necessary, by adding additional members to their delegations.

On 14 July 2020, the Security Council adopted resolution 2534 (2020) which renewed the mandate of the **UN Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA)**, a component of the Stockholm Agreement (S/2018/1134), until 15 July 2021. The resolution does not make any reference to women, peace and security.

In March 2020, the Security Council adopted resolution 2511 (2020) which extended the **sanctions regime** for one year and **explicitly referenced conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)** as a criterion for designation. Condemning violations of international humanitarian law and of international human rights law, including those involving CRSV in areas controlled by the Houthis as recorded in the Panel of Experts' final report (S/2020/70), the Council affirmed that sexual violence in armed conflict could constitute a sanctionable act that threatens the peace, security or stability of Yemen.

In its 2020 report, the **Panel of Experts** identified a **Houthi network involved in the repression of women** who oppose the Houthis, including perpetrating sexual violence, headed by the director of the Sana'a-based criminal investigation department (CID), Sultan Zabin, who remains in office. The Panel found that since the end of 2017, the Houthis specifically targeted women that were participating in political movements or demonstrations or working for non-governmental organizations on projects related to women's empowerment. The Panel documented 11 cases in which women were arrested, detained, beaten, tortured, or raped because of their political affiliations or activism. Women have been raped in detention and forced to undergo abortions once pregnant from sexual violence. The Panel notes that women were detained at secret detention locations exclusively for women. The Houthis operated this repression scheme under the guise of curbing prostitution, serving three purposes: deterring families from searching for the women and protesting their disappearance because of the associated stigma; allowing officials to conduct the arrests, detentions, and violations with impunity; and deterring these and other women from participating in political activity. The Panel concluded that these acts of repression against women may constitute a threat to peace, security and stability of Yemen and fall within the designation criteria of resolutions 2140 (2014)

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<sup>1</sup> This background note, including the recommendations at the end of this document, is prepared by UN Women as the secretariat of the Informal Experts Group on Women, Peace and Security, in consultation with other UN entities and the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, which coordinated inputs from UN entities based in or working on Yemen.

and 2216 (2015). In the report, the Panel also noted that Houthi de-facto authorities refuse to approve projects of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) relating to women, peace and security or the empowerment of women and that the Houthis have begun to indirectly target those engaged in protection or humanitarian activities aimed exclusively at women.

**On February 25th 2021, the Security Council adopted resolution 2564**, which renewed the sanctions regime and mandate of the Panel of Experts, and **added Sultan Zabin to the sanctions list** for acts that threaten the peace, security and stability of Yemen, including violations of applicable international humanitarian law and human rights abuses. The description of these acts includes “sexual violence and rape against politically active women” and the disappearance of women, including at least one minor, in undisclosed detention centers. This was the first addition to the sanctions list since April 2015. The resolution also expressed the Council’s support for “**the full, effective, and meaningful participation of women**, affirming the equality of the sexes and the need for full implementation of **Yemen’s National Action Plan** in accordance with resolution 1325” and condemned conflict-related sexual violence in the strongest terms.

**Three women from Yemeni civil society have briefed the Security Council** in country-specific meetings since the last IEG. In April 2019, Muna Luqman, speaking on behalf of Food for Humanity and the Women Solidarity Network told the Council about the leading efforts of women to bring peace and hold communities together and criticized the Stockholm peace consultations for excluding women and resulting in a gender-blind agreement. She reported that the only female member in the government delegation proposed increasing seats for women within delegations, which must remain vacant if no women are selected. Reminding the Council of the participation of Houthi women representatives in the National Dialogue Conference and noting that Houthi women had expressed their readiness to participate in peace negotiations, Ms Luqman argued that there is no reason for continuing to exclude women except a poorly designed peace process. She asked the Council to demand that at least 50 percent of the delegates of the negotiating parties be women and that the UN Special Envoy and the Chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee consult regularly with women and ensure their meaningful inclusion in all peace processes. She also urged the Council to adopt stronger, legally binding language in Council decisions emphasizing the inclusion of women, youth, southerners, and other marginalized social groups. In July 2020, **Wafa’a Aisadi**, General Coordinator of Médecins du Monde in Yemen, told the Council about mothers and children dying because of preventable complications during pregnancy or birth. She asked for the Council (including permanent Council Members) to end their logistical and military support to the parties, to lift restrictions on importation and exportation of all commercial goods, to ensure safe and unfettered humanitarian access, and maintain aid funding. At the same meeting, **Raja Abdullah Ahmed Almasabi**, Chairwoman of the Arab Human Rights Foundation, spoke about the situation of people with disabilities in Yemen. She noted that thus far no person with disabilities had been engaged in any peace process.

### **Women’s participation and representation in the peace process and in public life**

The low numbers of women in face-to-face talks and informal discussions remains a pressing concern. In the negotiations led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of the 2019 **Riyadh Agreement**, no women were represented in the Government of Yemen delegation or in the delegation of the Southern Transitional Council, nor in subsequent negotiations on the implementation of the political, military and security arrangements. The Riyadh Agreement implementation resulted in the new Cabinet that includes no women ministers (as mentioned below). During negotiations of the 2018 **Stockholm Agreement**, the Special Envoy offered additional seats so that women would be better represented and could participate in these meetings, but both parties declined, and there was only one woman in the government delegation and no women in the Houthi delegation. In 2020, and in events marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of resolution 1325, the Special Envoy publicly stated his commitment to reserved seats for women in future talks.

In his briefings to the Security Council, the UN Special Envoy regularly reports on consultations with women from across Yemeni society, including the **Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group**, to better integrate their priorities and concerns into the mediation efforts. OSESGY established the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group in 2018 as a mechanism to address the structural exclusion of women in Yemeni political parties and ensure that women's perspectives inform the work of the Office, as well as to serve as an advisory body. Although consultative bodies can play an important and influential role, they are not a substitute for women's full, equal and meaningful participation. In line with the 2019 WPS report of the Secretary-General (S/2019/800) and Security Council resolution 2493 (2019), in April 2020, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY) held a virtual, internal **high-level strategy meeting** to explore ways of ensuring greater inclusion in the peace process.

The UN Mission to support the **Hudaydah Agreement** has consulted with women's representatives and organizations, including the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, as well as stakeholders within the territory of the parties on either side of the Hudaydah frontlines in both Aden and Sana'a, to promote women's participation in the work of the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) and the implementation of the ceasefire.

Despite the parties' resistance to including women in their delegations, **Yemeni women mediators and women's groups play key roles in peacebuilding** at all levels of society including local ceasefires, mediating to end conflicts over water and land resources, negotiating humanitarian access and prisoner release, and protection. The UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen (Group of Eminent Experts) reports that women have taken the lead in mediating hundreds of detention releases. Women's groups were also among the most vocal in the promotion of the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, including a massive advocacy campaign in April 2020 led by the Group of Nine Coalition and that has reached more than a million people in Yemen. The lack of funding for local and sub-national peacebuilding work is an impediment to the crucial work of many local peacemakers, who often pay out of their pockets to cover travel and meeting expenses.

Yemeni women remain seriously **underrepresented in senior decision-making and leadership positions** in political parties and components where individuals in negotiating panels are typically drawn from. This situation persists despite the 2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) outcome that a minimum 30 percent quota for women be applied to remedy historical underrepresentation in public institutions. In December 2020, the Government of Yemen's new cabinet was formed without a woman among the 24 ministers, which is the first time in 20 years this has occurred. One of the few female senior government officials, Deputy Minister Yasmin al-Awadhi, was one of over 20 individuals killed in a missile attack on Aden airport that coincided with the new Cabinet's arrival in Yemen to assume its duties. Following the criticism surrounding the absence of women in the Cabinet, the government is reportedly considering appointing women to vice- and/or deputy minister positions in several ministries. Senior appointments by the President in January 2021 continued to ignore women, including for membership at the Consultative Council, Yemen's second parliamentary chamber where appointments are made by the President. Following his participation in the Third Feminist Summit in December 2020, organized by Yemeni civil society, the new Governor of Aden, Ahmed Hamed Lamlas, appointed three women to senior positions in his government in February 2021.

**Yemen's judicial institutions continue to be male dominated.** There are 160 women among the country's 3000 judges and prosecutors. There are no women on the High Judicial Council and only one, the Vice-Chair, out of the nine judges of the Supreme Court of the Government of Yemen. The de facto authorities in Sana'a have stopped allowing women to join the High Judicial Institute - opened to them in 2006. The Supreme Court operating in Sana'a has no women among its 48 judges.

The Yemeni Government adopted its **first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP)** in December 2019, and it was officially launched in May 2020. The plan includes activities related to capacity building of women and government staff; development of databases, guidelines, research and documentation of women's rights issues; awareness campaigns; and services, including protection services for terrorism survivors, a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programme for women combatants, a girls' education programme, and mobile clinics and livelihood programmes for IDPs and refugees. It also includes recommendations to guarantee a minimum of 30 percent of women's participation in peace negotiations and to ensure women's participation in ceasefire monitoring, prisoners and detainees' committees and relief and reconstruction bodies. Several UN entities, two international NGOs and seven Yemeni NGOs participated in the development of the NAP. However, women's organizations complain that the process was not inclusive, that many of their recommendations were not integrated, and that it lacks budget allocations for its implementation, for monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and for coordination platforms between the government and civil society.

**Yemen's national machinery for women is not functioning.** Yemen was ranked last in the 2019/2020 WPS Index published by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and its score significantly worsened compared to previous years.

### **Human rights issues, including conflict-related sexual violence**

There is also **no independent national human rights institution** in Yemen, although the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights, which is constituted by nine commissioners –four of them women- and nine investigators -all men- provides information on conflict-related sexual violence in its periodic reports. Yemen submitted its combined seventh and eighth periodic reports on implementation of the Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2013, but this has yet to be formally reviewed and it is expected that a review date may be set soon.

**Women human rights defenders** continue to face repression by parties to the conflict due to their work, including the provision of legal support for survivors of violence from men in their families. The repression often involves false allegations regarding the morality and reputation of the women, including allegations of a sexual nature. The Group of Eminent Experts investigated the Houthis' repression of women activists under the pretext of tackling prostitution estimating that between July 2019 and June 2020, 279 women and girls had been detained in secret detention facilities where they had been subjected to routine humiliation, indoctrination, and torture, including rape. This targeting of women human rights defenders encourages the broader community to associate them with "immorality" and has pressured many women to conform and curtail their public role in society. Afra Hariri, a human rights defender and member of the OSESGY's Technical Advisory Group was targeted with threats, including death threats and a smearing campaign between 2016 and 2019. Last year a Houthi-affiliated court issued a death sentence against Dr. Nadia Al-Saqqaf, former Minister of Information and current member of the Women Solidarity Network. In addition to the absence of security and the restriction of movement, civil society organizations face bureaucratic impediments in working on gender-related issues and women, peace and security, especially in the north.

During 2019 and 2020, OHCHR documented six cases of violations against women human rights defenders in Aden, Ibb, Taiz and Hudaydah including death threats, verbal abuse, insults, libel, threats of rape through phone calls, messages, and social media. In one case, a human rights defender was forbidden by authorities to continue her support to GBV survivors and her freedom of opinion and expression were restricted. In another verified case, a defender who was subjected to recurrent threats by the alleged perpetrator in a rape case, who accused her of being a traitor and sharing information with a conflict party. The verified cases were committed by the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council-aligned forces, and the Islamic State.

Women, girls, men, boys and those with non-conforming sexual identity face a heightened **risk of sexual and gender-based violence**. The Group of Eminent Experts concluded that there are “reasonable grounds to believe that all parties to the conflict committed gender-based violence, including sexual violence”. This includes 37 verified cases of sexual violence by members of the Security Belt Forces between 2016 and 2019, and a pattern of rape against Ethiopian migrants during the “anti-migrant detention campaign” of 2019. The Group also documented cases of transgender, gay and non-binary people being arbitrarily detained and subjected to sexual violence, as well as sexual violence used against men and boys as a means of torture to coerce confessions by Security Belt forces at the detention facility in al-Bureiqa Coalition Base, Aden. The Group also noted that all conflict parties and actors are involved in the mistreatment of detainees, forced disappearances and arbitrary detention. In its 2021 report, the Panel of Expert noted that the Houthis refused a UN official’s entry to Sana’a, following publication of its January 2020 report and findings related to sexual violence.

**Reported cases of gender-based violence are rising.** Data from the UN indicates a 13 percent increase in survivors accessing GBV-response services in 2020 compared to 2019. In one governorate in southern Yemen, statistics indicate an increase of 29 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 and of 41 percent compared to 2018. **Displaced women and girls** are specifically vulnerable, due to limited shelter options, lack of privacy, threats to safety, and limited access to basic services, and displaced girls are at high risk of **forced marriage**. The **COVID-19 pandemic** has elevated GBV risks due to tensions resulting from dwindling family resources and lockdown conditions. UN Women’s survey found that women were at higher risk of violence during the pandemic, with 39 percent of respondents reporting that they witnessed violence or know a woman who had experienced any type of violence since the outbreak of COVID-19. 52 percent of respondents agreed that women should tolerate violence during the pandemic to keep their family together.

Women and girls represent over 13% of the total **migrant population** and are systematically subjected to grave violations that include GBV, debt bondage, forced labour and other abuses. It is estimated that 4,000 migrants are in detention in Sa’dah governorate of which 244 are women and girls. Conditions in detention, whether formal or informal facilities, fall far below internationally recognized standards. In Marib, 530 women and 237 girls have been trafficked and held in smugglers’ dens with no freedom of movement or access to basic services.

Tension and inconsistency between customary law and civil law in Yemen, makes it difficult for Yemeni women and girls (particularly in rural areas) to **access legal rights** in relation to GBV. The Group of Eminent Experts documented cases in which law enforcement agencies within the Government and Houthi de-facto authorities in Sana’a refused to investigate and prosecute GBV cases. In those cases that have been investigated, survivors frequently experience re-victimization.

Women and girls were recruited to join the *zainabiyat*, which are **Houthi-organized women’s security groups** trained to support the Houthis through indoctrination of women and girls in their ideology, maintaining order in female prisons and conducting law enforcement activities. The Panel of Experts documented violations committed by *zainabiyat*, including the arbitrary arrest and detention of women, looting, sexual assault, beatings, torture and facilitating rape in secret detention centers.

The use of explosive weapons has disproportionate gendered impacts, driving displacement and contributing to violence against women. On 5 April 2020, the **women’s section of the central prison in Taiz city was attacked** with explosive devices, killing five female detainees, a female guard and two children. Several people were injured. The devices came from a Houthi-controlled area and the Panel of Experts found that the attack constituted a violation of international humanitarian law. Women’s groups emphasize the gendered impact of schools in Taiz being used for military purposes. In such schools, girls are harassed by armed groups and many families prevent their daughters from pursuing their education.

### **The impact of the humanitarian crisis on women and girls and their socioeconomic situation**

Yemen continues to be the world's **worst humanitarian crisis** with 20.7 million people – 66 percent of the population– in need of humanitarian assistance or protection, and women and children are affected the most:

- Women and girls make up more than 70 percent of the displaced population and 30 percent of displaced families are female-headed, compared to 9 percent before conflict escalated in 2015. Female-headed households are at higher risk of food insecurity due to lack of work opportunities, and they experience higher levels of food insecurity than male-headed households.
- More than a million pregnant and breastfeeding women are acutely malnourished, and this number is likely to double if food insecurity rises due to lack of funding.
- Every two hours one woman or girl dies in Yemen giving birth. Only 20 percent of functional health facilities provide maternal and child health services and 6 out of 10 births take place without a skilled birth attendant.
- 5.2 million women and girls of childbearing age and 1.7 million pregnant and breastfeeding women have limited or no access to reproductive health services and UNFPA is the primary source for reproductive services in the country. Some Houthis officials continue to restrict women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, including family planning.
- 6.1 million women require urgent access to gender-based violence services. In addition, service providers report that there is a huge unmet demand for mental health and psychosocial support among Yemeni women and girls.
- There are only eight women shelters in the country run by the women's organization Yemeni Women Union.

Due to **funding shortfalls**, in 2020, 80 of the 180 facilities UNFPA supports to provide safe deliveries shut down due to the lack of funding. As a result, more than 1 million women, including 20,000 women at risk of complications during pregnancy and delivery, lost access to services, and UNFPA has documented cases of maternal deaths in the districts where the closures took place. In addition, 350,000 women lost access to GBV services following the closure of 12 safe spaces for women and girls.

**Women's socio-economic situation** is catastrophic. The conflict parties continue to practice economic warfare and profiteering, obstructing financial flows, blocking imports, and starving opponents of funds or materials. An estimated 48 percent of Yemeni women are illiterate, their labor force participation rate is at 7.5 percent, and only two percent of Yemeni women have a bank account. Existing social norms, including the strong belief that women's roles are primarily domestic and entail extensive household and caretaking responsibilities are a key factor contributing to the low female labor force participation. With the increased number of female-headed households due to the conflict, including displacement, the absence of male breadwinners, and the non-payment of salaries to civil servants, women and girls have taken on new responsibilities and decision-making roles out of financial necessity. However, COVID-19's global recession resulted in a prolonged dip in women's incomes and labor participation which especially affects women-led businesses. This increased Yemeni women's exposure to unemployment, economic marginalization and poverty. In a recent UN Women survey 61 percent of women reported a decline in income or complete loss of their income following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of adequate support and economic opportunities, women and girls become vulnerable to negative coping strategies such as child marriage, child labor and human trafficking. Displaced girls are more likely to lose access to schooling as families with limited resources de-prioritize their right to education and often resort to child marriage.

The mobility of women and girls has also been seriously constrained, as women must have a *mahram* or male family member accompanying them to pass through checkpoints when traveling. These **mobility**

**restrictions** affect women's abilities to fully participate as economic and political actors, to access services and markets, to visit family, to participate in community, civic, and political life, and even to leave their homes to access much-needed humanitarian assistance.

### **Recommendations**

Many of the recommendations from 2017 ([S/2017/627](#), [S/2017/1040](#)) and 2019 ([S/2019/253](#)) are still relevant, especially those with regards to women's participation. In addition:

- Council Members should request the Office of the Special Envoy to summarize its plans and commitments to enhancing women's inclusion and gender mainstreaming in its work in 2021.
- When renewing the mandate of UNMHA, the Security Council should call on the mission to ensure that it is systematically engaging with diverse women's organizations in all areas of its work and to report on the outcomes of such outreach.
- The Security Council should publicly condemn political violence against women and threats and attacks against women human rights defenders in Yemen, and encourage Member States to provide material support for their protection and access to legal support and essential services.
- The Security Council should stress the need for a nationwide ceasefire and insist on explicit references to the protection needs and perspectives of civilians, particularly those in the most vulnerable situations, such as internally-displaced people, sexual and gender minorities, and women and girls; and that it ensures women's participation in its implementation mechanisms.
- Council members should remind the international community to prioritize funding to support women's local peacebuilding initiatives at the track II and track III level, and emphasize the importance of the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women, the inclusion of gender considerations, and the need for protection strategies for women participating in these efforts.
- In the 2140 Sanctions Committee, Council members should continue to consider the listing of additional individuals identified by the Panel of Experts responsible for the repression of women, including the use of conflict-related sexual violence.
- Council members should inquire about the capacity of the UN to coordinate activities related to the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence, including the implementation of monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements.
- Council members should promote full adherence to Member State obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty.
- Council members should support, in close cooperation with civil society, the implementation and resourcing of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, including through supporting and funding diverse women's rights groups at sub-national and local levels and their inclusion in the peace process.
- Council Members should emphasize the urgent need for humanitarian assistance in Yemen to fully integrate gender considerations and prioritize the expertise and resources needed to meet the needs of women and girls and increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence, including among the internally-displaced and refugee populations in Yemen, as well as engaging with men and boys to support the inclusion and empowerment of women and girls in vital household and community decisions.
- Council members should encourage the international community and all relevant UN entities to prioritize flexible funding to support women's local peacebuilding initiatives, including by supporting the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, alongside requesting international and national-level NGOs and research institutes to demonstrate ongoing integration of the WPS agenda into their day-to-day work.