

MIDDLE EAST

Women and War in Yemen: Gendering of the Yemeni Civil War

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The Yemeni civil war began in 2014 when Houthi rebel forces took control of the capital Sanaa. Already destabilized by the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the country is now home to one of the world's [worst humanitarian crises](#). With almost [75% of its population](#) in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, Yemen has continued to be at the top of the world's "worst" lists since the war began –the worst humanitarian crisis, [worst](#) hunger crisis, and [largest](#) displacement crisis. The intervention of coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015 brought most of the country to the brink of starvation and resulted in the [worst outbreak of cholera](#) in history. Most recent [data](#) show that nearly half a million people have lost their lives due to both the direct and indirect consequences of the war —violence, malnutrition, hunger, disease, climate change, and displacement. In this devastating war, women and children are among the most at-risk. Indeed, women's rights and empowerment have never been a priority for Yemeni politics in a country with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, restrictive laws, and limited political representation for women. Thus, women have had to navigate not only gender challenges, but also a deadly war that has killed thousands, forced many to flee their homes, and left others without necessities, healthcare, and access to food and safe water.

Background

After the 2011 uprisings, chaos was already intensifying when in 2014, the administration of then-acting President Rabbuh Mansur Hadi enacted deep cuts in fuel subsidies, which led to renewed protests in Sanaa. Hadi had come to power in 2012 after long-time president Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to step down as part of a transition deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council. At this time, however, Houthi rebels took control and [seized](#) key government buildings in the capital city.

The Houthis, a Zaidi Shia Muslim group from Yemen's northern governorate of Saada, emerged in the 1990s as a socio-religious movement protesting their marginalization and advocating greater regional autonomy. They transformed into an armed faction and engaged in six rounds of conflict with Saleh's government between 2004 and 2010. Hadi's forces did not have enough military strength to independently confront the Houthis, leading him to call for foreign intervention. President Hadi subsequently [resigned](#) and fled to Saudi Arabia, leaving the country without a president.

In late February 2015, Hadi resurfaced in Aden, a major city in southern Yemen outside the control of the Houthi rebels. He withdrew his resignation and [claimed](#) to remain the legitimate president of Yemen. In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition [entered the conflict](#), intending to reinstate Hadi and counter what Saudi Arabia and its allies saw as a growing Iranian influence through the Houthis.

In May 2017, southern Yemeni leaders, who sought greater autonomy or independence for the area, established the Southern Transitional Council (STC) backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key member of the Saudi-led coalition. STC added a new layer to the Yemeni civil war, complicating the coalition's efforts to restore Hadi's internationally recognized government. Clashes ensued between the STC-aligned forces and the Hadi-aligned fighters. Early in the conflict, former President Saleh had formed an alliance with the Houthis, but in December 2017, he [announced](#) his separation from the group and called for negotiations with Saudi Arabia. Within days, he was [killed](#) by Houthi forces, further polarizing the conflict.

In December 2018, following intense fighting near the port of Hodeidah, a critical hub for humanitarian aid, the UN [brokered](#) the Stockholm Agreement. This called for a ceasefire at the site, a prisoner exchange, and the withdrawal of forces from the port area. After an intensified conflict, Saudi Arabia [brokered](#) a deal in late 2019 between the Yemeni government and the UAE-backed STC, whereby Hadi announced a new cabinet in an attempt at political consolidation.

Back-channel talks [started](#) in April 2022, when the UN brokered a twice-renewed two-month ceasefire between the Houthis and the government. Meanwhile, Hadi [resigned](#) to make way for a new seven-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), more representative of Yemen's

political factions. Rashad al-Alimi, a Hadi advisor with strong connections to Saudi Arabia and influential Yemeni politicians, chairs the new council to the present day. More recent developments have included the [peace talks](#) between Saudi Arabia and Houthi officials, brokered by Oman, in April 2023. However, concrete progress remained elusive. Talks [continued](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia, facilitated by China, and resulted in a significant agreement to restore diplomatic relations and reopen embassies on both sides. Iran's UN mission [stated](#) that this agreement could expedite efforts to renew the expired ceasefire.

Humanitarian Situation

According to a briefing to the Security Council, humanitarian personnel were arbitrarily detained by Houthi forces in 2021 and 2023, thus impeding the UN's critical relief efforts in Yemen. Three UN staff members from UNESCO and the Human Rights Office are still in detention despite diplomatic efforts and threats of criminal prosecution for undermining humanitarian operations. Yemen's infrastructure, including power and port facilities in Hodeidah, has suffered from escalating attacks. Hunger is at unprecedented levels, and cholera continues to spread, impacting over 203,000 people since March 2024. Urgent funding is needed for food, health, and protection services to address incrementing food insecurity, disease, and gender-based violence, as Yemenis endure the consequences of prolonged conflict and regional instability ([Ocha, 2024](#)).

The [malnutrition crisis](#) in Yemen is intensifying and is at particularly alarming levels in southern Yemen. The World Food Programme (WFP) has observed a 34% increase in severe acute malnutrition (SAM) from 2023, and for the first time, areas in Al Hodeidah and Ta'iz are projected to reach "Extremely Critical" (Phase 5) malnutrition levels. This trend aligns with broader food security issues, as over 17.6 million people are food insecure and six million are in an emergency phase of food insecurity (IPC Phase 4). A [comparison](#) of conditions from July to September 2024 with the projected period of October 2024 to March 2025 shows deterioration, particularly in Phase 3 and Phase 4 zones. WFP's efforts, including emergency food distributions, are hampered by funding shortfalls. Nearly half the population is expected to be in IPC Phase 3 or worse by early 2025.

Yemen's health crisis is exacerbated by destroyed infrastructure, disease outbreaks, and severe shortages of staff, medicine, and equipment. Over 10 years of conflict, more than [44% of health facilities](#) have become partially or fully non-functional. [The spread](#) of diseases such as cholera and COVID-19 is severe, with cholera particularly widespread, reaching over 203,000 suspected cases since March 2024 and disproportionately affecting the elderly and children under five. The country faces critical shortages of medicine and healthcare professionals, as violence and displacement have driven many health workers away, leaving those who remain overwhelmed and without adequate resources. [Frequent attacks on health facilities](#), including the use of drones, further compound the crisis.

Furthermore, Yemen faces [significant challenges](#) from natural disasters, particularly floods and intense seasonal rainstorms worsened by climate change. Heavy rains in July and August 2024 affected over 76,800 families, displacing many and causing severe infrastructure damage. Homes, schools, and farmland were destroyed, with 122 deaths and 167 injuries reported due to the flooding. The extreme weather not only displaced communities but also increased the spread of diseases. The overlap of climate-driven disasters with Yemen's ongoing conflict has created a dire situation as populations struggle to recover amid scarce resources.

The conflict in Yemen has had severe repercussions on civilians, with UN officials emphasizing the devastating humanitarian toll. In his [Security Council briefing](#), Hans Grundberg, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, highlighted that civilians are "paying the price" of regional escalations. The destruction of infrastructure has disrupted the transportation of goods, including food and medical supplies, and led to increased commodity prices. Recent airstrikes in key areas such as Hodeidah and retaliatory strikes have exacerbated civilian vulnerability, with the UN stressing the importance of keeping Red Sea ports open to ensure aid delivery.

The war economy continues to funnel resources to armed groups, while civilians bear the brunt of violence, poverty, and disease. The detentions and intimidation tactics targeting humanitarian workers and UN personnel, especially in [Houthi-controlled areas](#), further complicate the humanitarian response. The deteriorating security situation, compounded by regional tensions and internal violence, has left four out of five Yemenis living in poverty. The

UN's humanitarian response remains severely underfunded, with only [41%](#) of the 2024 appeal met. This leaves millions without adequate food, medical aid, or protection from escalating gender-based violence.

Impact on Yemeni Women and Children

Women and children are bearing the brunt of the crisis, mostly in silence. Over three-quarters of displaced people in Yemen are [women and children](#), with at least 26 percent of these households led by women, of whom 20 percent are under 18. They face threats of large-scale famine, ongoing violence, collapsing services, and prolonged displacement, alongside natural disasters. The absence or loss of male family members has thrust many women into roles as primary caregivers and breadwinners, all the while they are facing systemic discrimination, inequality, restricted access to basic services, barriers rooted in deep-seated sociocultural norms with rigid gender roles, and a lack of legal protections. These challenges are compounded by limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, which disproportionately affect women, particularly in rural areas. With rampant [inflation](#) and limited livelihood opportunities, many can no longer afford basic meals and face increased risks of starvation, gender-based violence, exploitation, and early marriage.

Before the war, Yemen was already [one](#) of the world's poorest countries, but now, it is on the brink of famine. At the current rate of decline, it will take Yemen [20 years](#) to return to its already dire pre-crisis levels of child hunger. Malnutrition rates among women and children remain among the highest in the world, with over two million children under five and 1.3 million pregnant or breastfeeding women [needing treatment](#) for acute malnutrition. Concurrently, around [six million women](#) of childbearing age lack access to basic reproductive health services. With Yemen's health system in ruins, the country has one of the region's highest maternal mortality rates, with one Yemeni woman [dying](#) from preventable causes in childbirth every two hours. Overall, an [estimated](#) 12.6 million women are in need of life-saving reproductive healthcare and protection services.

Before the war, violence against women and girls was [common](#) in Yemen. The conflict has made matters worse, with attacks and abuses against women [increasing](#) by 63%. [Around](#) three million women and girls in Yemen are at risk of gender-based violence. However, there is no

specific legislation in place to protect them. In the absence of legal protections, women are vulnerable to physical assaults and sexual harassment. As the crisis disrupts water systems and local markets, women face heightened risks when gathering supplies for their families or traveling longer distances to access essential services. Today, [approximately](#) 7.1 million women across Yemen urgently need services to prevent and address gender-based violence. However, these services are severely limited or entirely unavailable in some areas. Recent research [revealed](#) that only 0.12% of humanitarian aid goes to gender-based violence prevention and response services, underscoring the crucial need for these programs.

In addition to the health crisis, education poses major challenges. Over 4.7 million children [struggle](#) to access education as schools have been destroyed, and teachers, facing irregular salaries, have left to find other work. Many children are also forced to drop out due to their families' worsening economic conditions, leading them to seek employment or enter into marriage. Girls from 6 to 14 years are among the [most vulnerable](#), with [over](#) 36% out of school. A proposed law to set the minimum age for marriage and to keep girls in school until 18 has been abandoned.

In Houthi-controlled areas, women continue to face movement restrictions, as authorities [require](#) them to be accompanied by a *mahram* (male relative) to travel. Women are [threatened](#) with imprisonment and verbal abuse in the Security and Intelligence Bureau if they leave Sanaa without a *mahram*. This rule has especially affected women who need to travel for work, including those employed by humanitarian organizations, making it difficult to conduct fieldwork and limiting access to aid.

Responses and Initiatives by Women

Although Yemeni women have paid the heaviest price in war, they play a critical role in building peace within their communities despite setbacks and increased exclusion from official political and conflict resolution channels. Women's activism has taken various forms, from the political and academic advocacy of feminists like [Raufa Hassan](#) and Amal al-Basha to the Islamist activism of figures like Nobel Peace Prize laureate, journalist, and peace advocate [Tawakkol Karman](#). The capacity of women to lead in the landscape of opposition politics became evident with the outbreak of the 2011 Yemen uprisings when Karman gained global

recognition. She campaigned for press freedom, particularly through her organization [Women Journalists Without Chains](#), and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her leadership during the uprising.

One of the most notable successes for women occurred in 2013 when they [secured](#) 30 % of the seats in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Through their active participation, women helped shape the NDC's declarations and worked to secure a 30 % quota for women's representation in any newly formed government bodies or institutions. However, women's issues were thrown out the window when Houthis took control in 2014. Nevertheless, Yemeni women's activism shifted gears from political to grassroots diplomacy, reconstruction, and transitional justice.

One of the prime examples is the [Yemeni Feminist Movement](#) (YFM), established in 2013 by Alaa Al-Eryani, a gender equality advocate. Emerging from the frustration of women's consistent marginalization during Yemen's political instability and conflict, YFM is the country's first online feminist platform. It aims to raise awareness about feminism as well as discriminatory laws and practices that affect women in Yemen. The platform was the first to address the case of [Nada al-Ahdal](#), a ten-year-old girl who was being forced into a marriage contract. To this day, the movement has worked on issues of gender-based violence by conducting workshops and seminars to strengthen women's skills in social self-defense.

[Activists](#) like Huda Al-Sarari, a Yemeni lawyer and women's rights defender, for instance, have been working to address women's issues and the achievements of the women's movement in Yemen despite facing systemic violence and societal challenges. Her work sheds light on arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and secret prisons. Moreover, Al-Sarari [founded](#) the *Defaa Foundation for Rights and Freedom*, which focuses on these issues and has published several reports since 2015. The foundation even contributed to the establishment of the *Association of Mothers of Arbitrarily Detained Individuals* and the *Association of Mothers of the Abducted*.

Furthermore, projects such as [Safe Space for Women and Girls](#) funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief) have been working for years to advance the status of women in Yemen and increase

community awareness of their issues and roles. As part of these efforts, focus group discussions are held regularly to assess gender gaps, gender-based violence, and effective interventions. The projects also target displacement camps, specifically in Marib City, to address gender-based violence, gender discrimination, and the importance of psychological and social health.

Despite disruptions to their work and difficulties in a country with societal and structural barriers, Yemeni feminist activists, women's movements, and civil society organizations have been collectively promoting dialogue to foster broader societal change. Operating in a war-torn environment, these initiatives must navigate numerous challenges, including restricted mobility due to ongoing violence, limited funding and resources, and the risks of retaliation or repression by both state and non-state actors. Many activists adapt by leveraging informal networks and grassroots organizations to reach marginalized communities, utilizing digital platforms to amplify their voices and connect with international allies.

Peace Processes and Women's Involvement

As of November 2024, Yemen's peace process has experienced notable developments. In December 2023, the warring parties committed to a ceasefire and agreed to engage in a [United Nations-led peace process](#), a pivotal step toward resolving the conflict. This progress was strengthened by a year-long truce that began in April 2022 and led to a substantial reduction in violence and casualties, despite its formal expiration in October 2022. In [September 2024](#), President Rashad Al-Alimi met with UN Secretary-General António Guterres in New York to discuss the humanitarian situation and ongoing peace efforts in Yemen. During this meeting, President Al-Alimi expressed the government's openness to various initiatives to achieve peace, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive solutions. Additionally, in [October 2024](#), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and KSrelief collaborated to strengthen peace committees in Yemen. This initiative focused on building trust and resolving community issues to ensure that communities feel genuinely represented and served by the peace committees.

Yemeni women have been instrumental in grassroots peacebuilding efforts, often operating within their communities to achieve stability and cohesion. Initiatives such as the [Sheba Youth](#)

[Foundation for Development](#), led by Ola al-Aghbary, have established community conflict resolution councils in Ta'iz, addressing local disputes and promoting dialogue among residents. Similarly, the [Abductees' Mothers Association](#) achieved a significant milestone in October 2020 by facilitating the largest prisoner exchange in the history of the Yemen war.

Furthermore, Yemeni women have developed frameworks like the [Feminist Peace Roadmap](#), which outlines a phased approach to achieving inclusive peace, justice, and human security to tackle the exclusion of women from formal negotiations. The ongoing initiative led by the Peace Track Initiative, in collaboration with Yemeni women leaders, focuses on implementing the roadmap to promote inclusive and gender-sensitive peacebuilding processes in Yemen. This initiative adopts a three-phase approach: ceasefire, comprehensive peace negotiations, and political transition, with a strong emphasis on ensuring 30% women's representation at all decision-making stages. It prioritizes the inclusion of marginalized groups and addresses critical issues such as transitional justice, humanitarian aid, governance reforms, and the reintegration of displaced populations. This initiative aims to achieve a just and sustainable peace in Yemen by amplifying the voices and needs of diverse communities.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has also recognized the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding efforts. Through projects like the [Social Protection to Provide Social Cohesion in Vulnerable Communities in Yemen](#), UNDP supports peace committees that include women, providing them with essential conflict resolution tools and resources. This initiative aims to increase the capacity of these committees to effectively address conflicts within communities, promoting harmony and stability amidst challenging circumstances. UNDP fosters a culture of dialogue, coexistence, and peacebuilding across Yemen by equipping peace committees in various governorates with the necessary skills and support.

Conclusion

The civil war in Yemen has led to destruction, displacement, and societal fracture. The country has been pushed to the brink of collapse and faces one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. For women and children specifically, the toll has been catastrophic. Displacement, famine, lack of healthcare, and the systemic erosion of social safety nets have

compounded gendered vulnerabilities, leaving Yemeni women disproportionately impacted by violence, poverty, and inequality. Yet amidst this backdrop of despair, Yemeni women have displayed remarkable resilience and agency, emerging as essential pillars of their communities and key advocates for peace.

The war has significantly reshaped the role of women in Yemeni society. Initially active participants in the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, women in Yemen advocated for democratic reform and greater equality. As the conflict evolved into a protracted war, their activism transitioned from political demonstrations to grassroots efforts. Women have emerged as key actors in providing essential services, mediating local disputes, and mobilizing communities for peace. These initiatives have shed light on the struggles of detainees, facilitated local reconciliation efforts, and emphasized the critical need for women's inclusion at all levels of peacebuilding.

Despite these contributions, women's participation in [formal peace negotiations](#) remains limited. For instance, during the 2018 peace talks in Sweden, women constituted only 4% of the negotiators, reflecting a broader trend of exclusion from official decision-making processes. Peace negotiations so far have marginalized women, failing to reflect their voices or priorities. The limited presence of women in high-level decision-making processes highlights the deep-seated gender inequalities entrenched within Yemeni society and exacerbated by the war. This exclusion not only jeopardizes the durability of peace efforts but also reinforces cycles of inequality and marginalization. This underrepresentation persists despite the recognition of women's vital roles in peacebuilding at the community level. Addressing this disparity is essential to ensuring the sustainability and inclusiveness of Yemen's peace processes.

However, Yemeni women continue to lead efforts to create a more inclusive and sustainable vision for peace. Achieving lasting peace and recovery in Yemen requires an inclusion of women that moves beyond rhetoric and becomes a central pillar of political, social, and humanitarian strategies. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes empowering women at the grassroots level, integrating gender perspectives into all stages of peace negotiations, and strengthening legal and institutional frameworks to protect women's rights. The international community has a critical role to play in this effort. International actors must

prioritize initiatives that support grassroots organizations and empower women economically, socially, and politically, extending their focus beyond funding immediate humanitarian needs. Programs focused on education, livelihood development, and the prevention of gender-based violence are critical to building resilience within Yemeni communities and creating pathways for women's active participation.

Ultimately, Yemen's path to recovery will be shaped by the collective resilience of its people, particularly its women. Their leadership, vision, and courage amid immense challenges shine a light on a pathway toward a more equitable and peaceful future. To dismiss their contributions and exclude their voices from the process of rebuilding would be a disservice not only to Yemeni women but also to the prospects of sustainable peace. Yemen's recovery must be a collective effort that recognizes the agency and potential of all its people, especially those who have borne the brunt of the war's devastation. By including women as equals in the peace and development efforts, Yemen will have better chances of moving toward a future where justice, equality, and prosperity prevail.

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