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YEMEN: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

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SUMMARY

Yemen's recent history has been tumultuous and dogged with conflict and political crisis. As such, while the peace agreements and national dialogue bodies reflected women's presence and interests in what a post-Arab Spring Yemen might look like, the various gender provisions could not be realised in the face of escalating conflict and the subsequent humanitarian crisis that remains ongoing. The role of women today has also been shaped by the political divides present in Yemen, as the Yemeni state was only unified in 1990. The two regions in Yemen have a different history in relation to women's roles in political, economic and cultural spaces. In the current context, discussions relating to women's participation are framed in terms of insecurity, concerns about insecurity due to the heightened presence of armed groups, other conflict-related violence, extremism and the unfolding humanitarian disaster.

STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf 2011

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights		✓				
Development	✓					
Post-Conflict Issues	✓					
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation			✓			
General	✓					

Comprehensive National Dialogue Report 2014

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights			✓			
Development			✓			
Post-Conflict Issues			✓			
Violence Against Women				✓		
Participation					✓	
General				✓		

The Peace and National Partnership Agreement 2014

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights	✓					
Development	✓					
Post-Conflict Issues	✓					
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation		✓				
General	✓					

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

CONSTRAINTS

1. Highly insecure environment - predominantly violence but also food insecurity
2. Prevalence of conservative religious ideology that discriminates against women
3. Widespread abuse by security forces
4. Fragmentation of women's movements in Yemen

ENABLERS

1. Active and visible participants in demonstrations
2. Strong presence of women in transition bodies
3. A history of women's organising and presence in the different political factions



Late in 2011, women gathered in protest in Sana'a and burned their veils... an expression of dissent against the President.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The Republic of Yemen was formed in 1990. Prior to the unification, the same territory was made up of the Yemen Arab Republic (in the north) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (in the south). Each region has a distinct political identity, and women's organising in each location is different, which has an effect today on which women engage in the conflict and any peace process (Heinze 2016; Badran 1998). This division is also an important factor in ongoing conflict today.

During the same wave of protests that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Yemenis also took to the streets to protest poverty, unemployment, corruption and attempts by the President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to extend his rule beyond what the law mandated. Later in 2011, Saleh stepped down and handed over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who became Acting President for a two-year period as Yemen transitioned. Hadi also attempted to extend his rule beyond the mandated two years, until he was forced to resign due to the escalation of tensions with rebel forces (the Houthis) in early 2015 (though he then fled to Aden in the southern part of Yemen, where his resignation was rescinded and the Houthi escalation declared a coup). The Houthi rebels began to gain power in 2011 during the initial elections and grew their territory in Yemen to cover Sana'a, the capital city, in 2014.

This tension is what shapes the conflict that is ongoing today, though the number of actors and allegiances continues to grow. While the peace agreements and talks examined in this project pre-date the most recent conflict in Yemen, this context is important to understand as it affects the ongoing crisis.

Yemen's population is divided and shaped through religious and tribal differences, and while sectarian divisions were not relevant to most Yemenis prior to this conflict (intermarriage for example between Sunni and Shia communities was very common), this has changed in the face of the rise of political Islam in the country (the Houthi are Zaidi Shias).

Today, the conflict is centrally between the Houthi rebels (and their allies) and the Yemeni government forces under President Hadi (with support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). Another element in this is the presence of foreign fighters returning to Yemen from Iraq and Afghanistan, and engaging in conflict again. Also Al-Qaeda and IS have a local presence. The former maintains control of some territory in Yemen, and the latter has carried out attacks on Yemeni soil.

Throughout the conflict, a number of key peace processes and talks were initiated. The most substantial was the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was a process that took place between March 2013 and January 2014 in Sana'a. The document that resulted from the Dialogue that details key agreements relating to governance, transition, rights and development was coded for this project.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

The three most significant documents from the Yemen peace process are discussed in this analysis. The first document, *Agreement on the Implementation for the Transition Process*, lays out the transition processes, including the transfer of power and the NDC. This was signed in 2011 and includes a number of gender provisions. The first stressed that 'due consideration shall be given to the representation of women' in the government of national unity (part III, 10a). It also ensures women have the right to vote in the elections and referendums related to the transition and presidential election (part III, 18b). Most significantly, it states that women must be 'represented in all participating groups' in the National Dialogue Conference (no specific number or per centage is provided though) and that protection and advancement of women should be included in the conference outcomes (part IV, 20 & 21).

The most significant document to come out of the Yemeni peace process is the *National Dialogue Conference (NDC) Report*. The NDC had the purpose of meeting the demands of the 2011 uprising and ensuring a way forward for Yemen.

The NDC included the following working groups:

1. The Southern working group
2. The Sa'dah working group
3. National Reconciliation and Transitional Justice
4. Statebuilding and Constitution-Principles and Foundations
5. Good Governance

6. Building Foundations for the Security and Military Institutions
7. Independent Institutions and Special Issues
8. Rights and Freedoms
9. Development

Section 7 in particular detailed the functions of the National Women Authority and the High National Authority for Motherhood and Childhood and under each of these, a series of gender-provisions and rights are laid out. Section 8 also outlines general rights relating to equality, as well as specific rights relating to the criminalisation of female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual harassment and trafficking, and a specific section on women's rights (p. 156 in the English translation). The document does seem to emphasise a number of social and economic issues, including maternal health, access to micro-lending and other economic development initiatives.

The last document we coded for this project is the *Peace and National Partnership Agreement* signed 21 September 2014. The only gender provision in this document relates to recommendations that representation of women and youth be ensured in the allocation of Cabinet seats (article 2, paragraph 4).

Women played an active and visible role in the early part of the uprising in Yemen, both as protestors alongside their male counterparts but also as organisers of their own protests. Individual women also played an important role as organisers or key personalities in the protest movement. Late in 2011, women gathered in protest in Sana'a and burned their veils, using this symbolic act as an expression of dissent against the President as well as the ongoing insecurity they faced (Raheb and Bechmann 2012: 37-38). As for participation in the peace process, there is conflicting information and analysis on the role and influence of women in the various processes. Oxfam reporting credits women's strong participation in the NDC to their leadership in the revolutionarily movement (Oxfam 2015). Each party taking part in the NDC needed to appoint 30 per cent of seats to women, and as such, women took 152 of the 565 seats during the Conference. Women also led some of the working groups. Others highlight similar figures in participation but stress the overall losses that women have incurred since the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the worrying strength that conservative groups wishing to limit women's participation have (Adra 2013).

As conflict and tensions developed after the NDC and implementation faltered, work that focusses on longer-term gender justice has broken down (Anderson 2016). In part, this is due to funding and the focus on humanitarian needs but it is also a result of the conflict itself, as tensions and political divisions undermine what can be counted as the 'women's movement' and affects its capacity to function (Saferworld 2017).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

A full account of the women's movement and its shape in Yemen is difficult given its divided history, but there are instances of women's mobilisation, movement and organising in both states prior to unification. It is likely that this dual history has left its mark on Yemeni women and their organising in the 1990s, resulting in a fragmented women's movement (Badran 1998). It is important to consider that difference when understanding participation today, and which women are included in discussions on peace and statebuilding. Women in Yemen have experienced a vast increase in insecurity due to ongoing conflict, which has a marked impact on their capacity to participate - be it social, political or economic.

Women's participation on each 'side' of the Yemeni conflict (and its historic political divide) is significant. The role of women in the Islamist movement in Yemen seems to be the focus of much of the analysis on Yemeni women's activism in academic literature. This research highlights the reliance of the Islamist movement on women's leadership and participation, which in turn is shaped by cultural and religious norms, as well as more contemporary iterations of women's presence in the social networks and political efforts of Islamists in Yemen (Yadav 2010; Clark 2004). Discussions outside of this centre on personal status laws (PSLs) or other iterations of women's rights and the impact that Yemen's history of division, unification and conflict has had on it (Molyneux 1995; Wurth 2003; Badran 1995).

Prior to unification, in the Yemen Arab Republic (northern Yemen), the women's movement was fairly small and elite, and focussed on women's access and participation in development projects related to education, healthcare and sanitation, rather than on reform agendas related to PSLs (Wurth 2003). Their southern counterparts in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) reportedly had similarities in the makeup of the women's movement - being elite and well educated (Wurth 2003). However PDRY's women's rights framework looked very different, which Wurth (2003) explains is due to the state's reliance on women's engagement in economic activity given its socialist ethos. This in turn affected the role that women played in PDRY as activists and advocates for rights.

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The ongoing conflict has increased the pressure on women to support their families financially, as a result of death, disability or displacement.

Post-unification, these movements translated into a divided women's movement that drew heavily on the ideological divides existing in Yemen - between Islamic and secular ideologies. Women's groups then focussed around a variety of themes (though there is not much published on the 'feminist' women's movement in Yemen per se), including women's organisations in the Islamist movement. In that context, organisations engaged heavily in religious and political structures, and discourses in Yemen (women, for example, have a presence in the executive council of the Islah Party) (Clark 2004).

There is conflicting and understandably complex accounts about women's political participation and access to political spaces in Yemen. Reports on particular issues highlight that indeed there was active discussion and advocacy by a variety of actors in Yemen's recent history. The discussion of a women's quota in 2005 is one example, in which a number of women's groups debated the need, function and implementation of such a quota (Sultan 2005). On paper, Yemen's political system was supportive of women's political participation, especially as Yemen had ratified a number of international women's rights conventions and agreements, and made efforts to implement some of these commitments. On the other hand, reports show that the movement in Yemen was fragmented (partly along secular and conservative lines) and this created barriers for any efforts to improve women's access to formal political spaces (Mashhur 2003).

As fighting has been ongoing since 2011, and in many locations around Yemen there are a number of armed groups present, women experience heightened insecurity. As part of the growing insecurity, restrictions on women's access to public spaces seem to be defacto rule, enforced by extremist religious rhetoric that supports limitation of women's access to and involvement in political spaces (Saferworld 2013: 8-10; Adra 2013). This shows a starkly different reality to the one the NDC was striving for.

Similarly to Syria, women in Yemen have articulated concerns about state security actors and detention, some reporting 'arbitrary arrests and detention' due to activist work (Saferworld 2013, p. 12). Even women who do not engage in activist work report safety concerns, particularly in areas with presence of armed groups and checkpoints, a site where harassment and sexual violence occurs (Oxfam 2016).

Some key barriers to women's participation in the current climate include:

- Religious rhetoric that is not supportive of women in political decision-making processes
- Ongoing conflict-related insecurity
- Concerns around detention by state security forces
- Economic pressure as women become financially responsible for families, compounded by the conflict and blockades which are creating food and water shortages.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

To contextualise the role of women in Yemen's economy, Yemen ranks last out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap rating for 2016.

Historically, Yemeni women played an important role in agricultural work, including livestock care and management (Carapico 1996; Lackner 1995). Because of this, young women's labour is considered more valuable than their education, and this, coupled with social norms, undermined girls' access to education in rural contexts (Boxberger 1998). Yemen's urbanisation between 1970 and 1990 means that whilst the role women play in urban contexts is important, there is a significant distinction between their roles in rural and urban settings. Lackner (1995) highlights the invisibility of women's work in Yemen, particularly if it is agricultural work, as this is classed as domestic and as such, not often accounted for in data on women's labour force participation. For those in urban contexts, formal employment came in the form of work in factories, home-based work, in offices and in the health sector (for those who were able to access education). There was - and presumably continues to be - a presence of women in higher paying work, but this applies to elite women only. Domestic labour is also increasingly common but often performed by migrant women.

In the current context, women's economic opportunities continue to be hampered by social norms, but also the state's inability to deliver on development promises and agendas, undoubtedly made worse due to conflict (Manea 2010). The ongoing conflict has increased the pressure on women to support their families financially, as a result of death, disability or displacement (Saferworld 2017; Anderson 2016). Women have engaged in home-based income generation methods as a result. Prior to the conflict, Yemeni labour migration into Saudi Arabia also provided important resources in the form of remittances, but this has been undermined by mass expulsion of Yemeni citizens from Saudi Arabia in recent years. While rurally, women play an important role in the local economy and engage in agricultural work, these activities have also suffered due to price hikes, increased insecurity and blockades.

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