Status of Women during Conflict in Yemen

REFLECTIONS ON WPS UNSC 1325 & CEDAW 30TH RECOMMENDATION

This report is produced for To Be For Rights and Freedoms

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Introduction:

This report draws upon the WPS resolutions (including 1325) and CEDAW general recommendation number 30, which are significant in that they bring women’s human rights in conflict and post-conflict settings. Thematic areas within WPS resolution and CEDAW GR30 are discussed below reflecting the situation of Yemeni women during the current conflict. The report is based on reports collected from international organizations, including project annual reports, humanitarian bulletins and documents, preliminary assessments, and information obtained from local partners including NGOs, as well as, information available in media outlets.

1- Background information:

Yemen is one of the most impoverished countries in the middle east. Before the war, already more than 50% of the population were living under poverty line. Yemen was witnessing a humanitarian disaster with more than 16 million people in need of some form of humanitarian assistance (that is 60% of the population). Around 10 million people were food insecure, 13 million people had no access to clean water, and nearly 9 million people were without basic medical care. Only half of children in the poorest households are enrolled in basic education. Yemen had a high maternal mortality rate at 210 deaths per 100,000 live births. Six women were dying every day due to pregnancy or giving birth complications. (OCHA)

Additionally, Yemen was receiving a very low official ODA averaged at 13$ per capita (2013), comparing to 34$ per capita average of Least Developed Countries.

The situation has exaggerated due to the war. Recent UN figures indicate that around 6,015 people have been killed – half of them civilians, and 28,457 injured. The humanitarian situation has magnified with more than 21.2 million: 82% of the population are in need of humanitarian aid. Since March, around 2.3 million People have been displaced, half of them are children. Over 120,000 refugees and migrants have fled since April 2015. One in two people – 14 million people – are now struggling to find enough to eat. Oxfam stated that 7.6 million (more than a quarter of the population) are ‘one step away from famine’. Access to services further deteriorated with over 19.4 million people have no access to clean water. More than 14.1 million people are without access to basic medical care as hospitals are shutting down due to lack of medical supplies, power and clean water. Black markets are spread and food prices increased up to between 200 and 500%. (OCHA)
2- Yemen Policy on Women, Peace, and Security:

In Yemen, the Women National Committee (WNC) is the government mechanism for developing policies for women empowerment and development. WNC has developed a draft of the National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security Agenda which will require financial and technical support to be implemented. Additionally, WNC also implemented a project to monitor human rights violations against women and partnered with local NGOs to deliver humanitarian aid displaced women. Participation of women in democratic processes was integrated into the new draft of constitution that was announced in September 2014. The new draft of constitution set a quota of 30% for women political participation.

3- Conflict Prevention:

Before the current conflict, Yemeni women played a major role in Yemen’s uprising in 2011. They led mass demonstrations. They were modestly represented in the transitional agreement brokered by GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia that led to stepping down of Saleh. The Yemeni women constituted around 28% of the National Dialogue that concluded with national outcomes feeding into the draft of the new constitution.

With this conflict, a number of Yemeni women regrouped themselves last September 2015, to form the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security. It brings Yemeni women leaders together to improve women inclusion in peace building processes and security. The pact consists of around 50 Yemeni women representing the different spectrum including political parties, media, civil society, independent individuals..etc. The Pact is facilitated by UN Women and hence has a direct communication channel with UN Special Envoy. The Pact has officially met with the UN Special Envoy two times since its establishment in September and a special advisor to UN Envoy on civil society has been dedicated as a focal point for communication.

Although the Pact is at its infancy, yet the fact that it consists of women with different views to the conflict is on its own an achievement and makes the Yemeni women a step ahead comparing to male counterparts. The Pact is currently focusing on an initiative to build the trust between parties to the conflict.

To date two rounds of peace negotiations have been held, the first was in June 2015, and the second was in December 2015. Women are poorly represented in both delegates and were not welcomed to set as observant in the latest round of talks. There
is a lack of understanding from both parties to the conflict to the importance of inclusion of women and youth in the peace processes.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Example of Women Led Peace Initiatives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child soldiers’ rehabilitation: Warda Ben Sumait a Lawyer and Human Rights Defender ran a programme to rehabilitate child soldiers that were recruited by Houthis and sent to fight in Aden. After the rehabilitation programme the children were sent back to their families vowing to spread message of peace and advise their peers not to fight for anyone.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partners to Peace: An initiative that was formed in 2015. This initiative focuses on building capacities of local community members on peace building and conflict resolution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journalists Making Peace: this is an initiative led by female journalists to combat hate speech and prompt reconciliation.</td>
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At the grassroots level, many women are leading local peace efforts, those are usually scattered and require support from relevant stakeholders to amplify their impact.

**4- Gender Based Violence:**

In Yemen, the national laws does not contain specific law or provisions to specifically protect women from gender-based violence, aside from general protection clauses in the Penal Code, that criminalizes infliction of physical harm.

Gender based violence (GBV) before war constituted a serious problem in Yemen. GBV before the war included forced marriages, early marriages, exchange marriages, polygamy, FGM, denial of inherence, restrictions to mobility. (UNFPA VAW Mapping, 2009). Additionally, 90% of women faced sexual street harassments (HNO, 2016). These problems has been magnified with the ongoing conflict.

Obtaining information about GBV was challenging as such the information reflected in this paper is a compilation of results from different sources including local and international agencies working in the field.
UNFPA and Intersos conducted a GBV trend analysis based on cases registered within their intervention in 8 governorates in Yemen. The report covered the period between January 2015 – December 2015.

The report investigated a total of 1,608 incidents that were registered during 2015, out of which 88% were female. The GBV cases reported include: 4% rape (11% of survivors were minors below age of 9), 6% sexual assault, 31% physical assault, 5% forced marriage, 24% denial of resources, and 30% psychological and emotional abuse. It is worth noting that 17% of the reported cases involved survivors of below 18 years.

In terms of citizenship, 70% of the survivors were Yemen nationals, 11% were stateless or people without papers, 9% IDP and returnees respectively, and only 1% refugees or migrants. The locations of GBV incidents were 69% of the incidents occurred in the host communities or in people’s homes, while 13% of the incidents occurred in unknown places, 10% cases happened post displacement.

As for perpetrators to survivors, 24.7% were unknown, 2.5% were health workers, almost 4% were army men, another 4% belonged to militia groups, 9.8% civil servants, 8.8% farmers.

Additionally, the Yemeni Women Union (YWU) annual report for 2015 covering their GBV emergency project which is spread in 18 governorates revealed that they provided GBV services to more than 5000, out of which 81% were female survivors. The GBV cases included 2.2% rape, 2.5% sexual violence, 35% physical violence, 8.6 forced marriages, and 38.9% were cases of deprivation of resources.

Additionally, Yemen recorded improvement in child marriages in 2013, as per the National Health and Demographic Survey (UNFPA, 2014), age of marriage was at average at 18 years old, with the current conflict, there has been fears that early marriage which is viewed as coping mechanisms for families for protecting their girls or easing financial burdens is increasing. An IDP assessment that was conducted in Taiz (UNHCR, 2015) revealed that 8% of girls age between 12-17 were pregnant, indicating a prevalence of early marriage.

OCHA also noted an increase of GBV incidents by 70% between March and September 2015. Those included sexual violence, domestic violence, early marriage and trading sex to meet basic survival needs. Local NGOs documented that 476 women and 508 children were killed and 1927 women and 2296 children were injured. They also documented cases of arbitrary detention for 10 women and 159 of children. (YCMHRV, 2016 March)
Additionally, Local NGO reported investigating 44 blind airstrikes by the coalition killed 120 women and 220 children, and injured 125 women and 167 children. (see Muwatana Blind Strikes Report, 2016).

Local NGO also reported direct targeting of women and children through snipers and cases of indiscriminate shelling. (See To Be for Rights and Freedom Report, 2015)

Other forms of violence against women reported in the media including:

- Restrictions of mobility: There are media reports indicating restriction to mobility by Houthi groups in Sana’a. It is done by systematically banning civilians from traveling or by confiscation of passports. For example, the chairperson of Women National Committee, Ms Shafiqah Saed was banned by Houthis to leave Sanaa for travelling 5 times up to date to participate in events outside of the country including efforts for peace building participation. (see table below for more details).
- Stoning of a woman in Hadramout by Qaeda for adultery. Two NGOs confirmed this information, however, both indicated that the family refused to provide information or discuss the case.
- Direct assault on female students: a female student was directly shot at in Sana’a University in February 2016. Asma’a Al-Sabri is believed to have a political disagreement with a Houthi affiliated person that escalated into shooting her. Female students organised set ins in the university calling to ban weapons on campus and for justice for their colleague. They described the crime as black shame (Yemeni tribal code of conduct indicating a horrible crime that brings shame).
- Kidnapping of girls: In Taiz, a 12 year old child Amani Al-Qadasi was kidnapped for 23 days in February 2016. Media reports indicate that her father is engaged in activism. The perpetrators are not known and the family refused to provide more information. Set ins were organized demanding the release of the girl child.
- Systematic Depletion of resources: Media reports indicated that the civil servants salaries were interrupted, suspended, or reduced for civil servants. The civil servants ministry in Sana’a is under Houthi control. Salaries of civil servants were reduced multiple times to support as they describe the “war efforts”. In Aden, civil servants salaries during the 4 months of being besieged by Houthis was not issued. Now it is still interrupted. Vulnerable groups including women who are retirees are still facing challenges obtaining their pension. Additionally, women
are encouraged or forced to sell gold. Media reports showed female Houthi supporters fund raising to support “War effort”.

Dr Shafiqah Saed Abdo is the Women National Committee (WNC) Chairperson in Yemen. She is a prominent Yemeni Leader. She is a member of The Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security. She is also member of Nasserite Political Party.

She was banned from travelling outside the country without a legitimate reason. Dr Shafiqah is one of the very few government officials who didn’t flee the capital of Sana’a after the Houthis took over. She resumed her role and carried out activities related to gender justice policies addressing all Yemeni women regardless of their backgrounds and affiliations.

Her last trip outside the country before the imposed travel ban took effect was in September 2015 to Cyprus where the Yemeni Women Leaders Pact for Peace and Security had a meeting facilitated by the UN Women. Yemeni women were hoping to pressure the government to include Dr Shafiqah in the delegate to the peace negotiations to be held in November 2015 to improve gender equality.

Dr Shafiqah requested officially to travel to Jordan to obtain permission for her and another 16 Women National Committee Staff to go to Jordan. It was an official mission to go sign a partnership with donors and to discuss the WNC’s national plan for 2016. The answer came in official letter on 10th November from the representative of the Acting Prime Minister Office - controlled by Houthis- came to allow the 16 staff members excluding Dr Shafiqah and suggesting her deputy heads the delegation. This ban comes as a second to a former one where Dr Shafiqah requested officially for permission to travel to Egypt for another work mission to participate in the Executive Council meeting of the Arab Women Organization. The ban was issued on 7th November stated the reason was due to the security situation the country is going through. This sparked a social media campaign in solidarity with Dr Shafiqah, however, it did not deter Houthis to further ban her from traveling. She was banned from traveling three times after those two incidents and this time Houthis refrained from issuing a written ban, instead only a verbal refusal.

Those violations restrict women’s mobility and free movement, moreover, it shows a pattern of systematic marginalization to women from different political affiliation.
5- Women Armed Recruitment:

Recruitment of women as armed groups has been noted in areas of conflict including Sana’a, Aden, and Taiz. A Yemeni female Human Rights Defender, Radhiyah Al-Mutawakel shared her account about violence that erupted in one of the set-ins calling to free victims of forced disappearance in Sana’a on September 2015. She noted that the peaceful set in was attacked by a group of women using physical and verbal violence. Al-Mutwakel was taken by the group of Houthi women and was kept in a car for more than an hour. They blind folded her and threatened to physically harm her.

Additionally, there are media reports indicating that in Taiz women and girls are being recruited within both the army and resistance fighters. The 35th Brigadier in Taiz issued a call to recruit women in the army. The target was to recruit 30 women. There were many applications and the Brigadier accepted 130 women. The women recruited by the army and resistance in Taiz are meant to help in securing controlled areas.

6- Access to Services:

Women and girls in Yemen face entrenched gender inequalities that limit their access to basic services and livelihoods opportunities. The ongoing conflict have exacerbated the impact of these inequalities. Women are more acutely affected by declines in living conditions and service availability.

- **Food**: It is estimated that 14.4 million people (55.6% of the population) are food insecure, out of which 49% are women (23% women, 26% girls). Food prices has increased. For example wheat prices increased an average of 47%.

- **WASH**: There are around 19.3 million Yemenis in need of water, sanitation, and hygiene services. That is Three in four Yemenis. Women constitute around 49%.

- **Social Protection**: Social welfare transfers for females have fallen by 73.3% since mid-March in comparison to only 60% for males.

- **Displacement and livelihood**: There are around 2.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), out of which 52% are women (30% women and 22% girls) (OHCHA HNO 2016). Displaced women often bear additional burdens of supporting their families including caring for injured members, dealing with loss of breadwinners, and challenges in accessing assistance, especially outside their communities. OCHA estimates that 30% of displaced women are heading their households.
- **Health Services**: Yemen preliminary DNA report revealed that 28% of health facilities are damaged. Currently, 6 out of 10 Yemenis have no access to any form of healthcare. An estimate of 14.1 million people require support to access adequate healthcare, including more than 522,000 pregnant women (15% of whom are expected to face delivery complications).

- **Nutrition**: 3 million people need malnutrition treatment or prevention services out of which 26% are women, 36% are girls, and 38% are boys.

- **Education**: 1.8 million children have been out of school since conflict escalated in mid March. In total an estimation of 3 million children, including 43% girls and 55% boys, require support to resume their studies. Yemen DNA preliminary report indicated that 30% of education facilities sustained physical damage. Schools are not functional due to damage, used by armed groups, or as shelter for IDPs.

- **Early recovery**: It is estimated that 6.9 million people are living in areas that urgently require early recovery assistance, out of which 49% are women.

7- **Funding gap and technical support:**

The conflict in Yemen has led to a humanitarian catastrophe that was already alarming before the war. It is estimated that 21.2 million people, around 82% of the population is in dire need of humanitarian aid. A humanitarian response plan was announced in February 2016 with an appeal of 1.8 billion dollars. Only 2% of the appeal has been met (36 million USD), out of which zero funds has been allocated to the Gender Based Violence component. Under the GBV component the plan set out a target of more than half a million people (right holders), with a budget of around 9.1 million USD. The large gap in funding is a major challenge for addressing GBV issues in Yemen.

8- **Recommendations:**

- UN should support government of Yemen to develop WPS Action Plan with allocation of funds focusing on the 4 areas of interventions including participation, early recover, protection, and prevention.

- Partner with non-traditional stakeholders and increase engaging with women rights and women led local NGOs. Improve contingency planning by building sustainable alliances specially women groups and building their capacity.

- Ensure fair distribution and allocation to humanitarian aid. Gender Responsive Budgeting.
- Build the capacity of local NGOs (SPHERE, Gender Sensitizing and Gender analysis, GBV Case management, MEAL, Project Management in Emergencies).
- Enhance Humanitarian Accountability Frameworks.
- Create a platform for coordination between UN agencies, INGOs, LNGOs, King Salman Relief Center, & UAE Red Crescent.
- Understanding the local-regional context and differences. Understand the South and North dynamics in Yemen.
- Ensure maintenance of dignity during aid distribution and adhere to protection principles.
- Humanitarian Programmes must have components on promotion of sustainable peace, social cohesion support, Psychosocial support, GBV comprehensive support, and livelihood.
- Allocate necessary funds for humanitarian programmes and reconstruction and recovery.

References:

- Yemen Preliminary Partial DNA report 2016.
- GBV trend analysis 2015 Incident reporting by 30 local associations to INTERSOS – UNFPA for 8 governorates: Aden, Lahj, Abyan, Shabwa, Al Dhalea, Amran, Sada'a and Hajja, December 2015.
- Financing Tracking System.
- Media reports