

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

THE HUMAN COST OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN YEMEN

*Implications for Women's Rights and their
Economic Contribution*

*A POLICY PAPER BY Dr Nadia Al-Sakkaf
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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

Despite recent peace talks in Yemen, local-level conflict has endured. Against this background, it is important to understand how a rise in violent extremism may exacerbate economic and social problems resulting from political instability. This growing threat will likely hamper Yemen's progress in achieving economic development, especially through women's contributions. The Houthis' rise to power has helped to erode human rights and freedoms, particularly with respect to women. Excluding women from the workforce and limiting their access to income generation at a time when Yemen needs it most is counterintuitive. While politicians and mediators strive to achieve peace, they must not ignore the impact of an extremist agenda on women's mobility, access to resources, and opportunities and abilities to make an impact on the country's economic prosperity.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

Investing in the economic empowerment of women is critical for sustainable peace and prosperity in Yemen. Women make up half of the population, and their exclusion undermines the country's recovery from conflict. To support women's economic contribution and integration into the workforce, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- *Investing in infrastructure that enables women's quick integration into the workforce is essential. Safe, accessible, and affordable transportation is a sure way to support women's economic contribution by allowing access to workplaces and markets locally and nationally.*
- *Investment in the internet is crucial. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of connectivity, and reliable and affordable internet is invaluable in promoting women's economic contribution. Affirmative action that directly supports women's access to the internet to enable them to study, train, work, and reach potential suppliers and customers is critical. Measures should also be taken to protect them from digital violence, including sexual harassment and threats, in their virtual interactions.*

- *Creating incentives for businesses to employ women is necessary. Women provide unique input in the private sector, and incentives for business owners by the government and donors need to be put in place, including tax reduction, logistical, and financial support.*
- *Vocational and technical education programs need to be developed. A national large-scale strategy to improve women's employability and income generation skills needs to be a high priority for economic recovery and resilience.*
- *A community awareness campaign needs to take place at the national level, changing social behaviour towards women's economic contribution and undoing many of the cultural and social regulations imposed on women's public activities.*

THE POLICY PAPER

The ongoing conflict, combined with a rise of extremist groupings, has led to a significant deterioration in Yemen's economic and social conditions. This has curtailed Yemeni women's basic civil rights and hindered their ability to contribute economically. Similarly, the deterioration in Yemen's economic and social conditions is a common factor motivating young men as well as some women to join armed militias on all fronts. Even as political discussions between rivals take place at the highest levels, it is important to note that the absence of war does not necessarily mean peace. This necessitates a deeper understanding of the extent to which violent extremism is prevalent in the Yemeni society, and how it will become an obstacle to achieving true and sustainable peace, and the prosperity of Yemeni men and women further down the line.

History has shown that when extremist groups around the world rise to power, women's rights and their contribution to public life are significantly reduced. Examples include the Taliban in Afghanistan, the

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Iran, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, and now the Houthis in Yemen.

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Prior to the war that started in 2014, Yemeni women had already been gravely impacted by widespread gender inequality, particularly in rural areas where conservative gender norms have tended to be more pronounced. Yemen’s female population as a whole was far more illiterate and unemployed than its male counterpart. In addition, women’s legal protections and ability to participate in politics and decision-making remained limited. Yemen’s enduring conflict has perpetuated and exacerbated these pre-existing gender inequalities. Economic opportunities for women have been severely affected by the conflict, with many women losing their jobs and struggling to support their families in the face of inflation and rising prices. Gender-based violence rates have also continued to climb; reports of sexual violence and forced marriage have risen in tandem with the conflict. This

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protracted crisis likewise has had a devastating effect on the educational prospects of girls and women. While a high number of schools have been damaged or destroyed, many families are unable to afford school expenses in the first place. Overall, women’s inclusion in public life has dropped sharply. Their participation in politics and

decision-making has also been severely impacted, with women largely

excluded from peace negotiations and other important decision-making processes.

Despite evidence from history and ample examples, the connection between violent extremism and sustainable development—especially through women’s economic participation—continues to be dismissed. Today we are closely following the news in Yemen, which is considered to be among the world’s worst humanitarian crises.¹ The Houthi rebels have been in control of much of the country since 2015. Women's economic participation in Yemen was already low prior to the conflict, with women making up only 26% of the work force in 2015. The World Bank finds that owing to economic decline, women’s participation is now far lower. The conflict has

further exacerbated the situation, with women facing significant barriers to accessing education and job opportunities.² Women's economic participation in

“ The conflict has disrupted the country's social fabric, leading to the displacement of millions of people and causing a breakdown in social cohesion. ”

Yemen has declined since the conflict began, with women facing increasing discrimination and violence. Violent extremism has also had a significant impact on Yemen's social development. The conflict has disrupted the country's social fabric, leading to the displacement of millions of people, and causing a breakdown in social cohesion. The conflict has also led to a rise in violence against women and girls, with many being sexually exploited and forced into early marriage. Women

¹ UN Refugee Agency. (2021, March 22). Yemen Crisis Explained.

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/yemen-crisis-explained/>

² Human Rights Watch. (2023, February 6). Houthis Violating Women's and Girls' Rights, Yemen. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/houthis-violating-womens-and-girls-rights-yemen>

and girls in Yemen also face increasing levels of domestic violence since the coup d'état in 2014.³

In areas under Houthi control, women face restrictions on mobility, dress code, and behaviour, and are often subjected to violence and harassment, and in some cases imprisonment and death.⁴ The Houthi authorities have also imposed strict gender segregation in public spaces, further limiting women's access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities.

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Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in Yemen has severely limited the availability and accessibility of services to address violence against women (VAW). The conflict has damaged or destroyed many health facilities, including those that provide

services for VAW survivors, and it has limited the mobility of women and girls, making it difficult for them to access services.

Women have also been disproportionately affected by the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, with many struggling to access basic necessities such as food, water, and healthcare.⁵

³ Mwatana for Human Rights. (n.d.). Fragile Walls. Retrieved May 5, 2023, from <https://mwatana.org/en/fragile-walls/>

⁴ Wilson Center. (2021, October 28). Preventing the Next Kabul: Confronting the Houthis' Violent Suppression of Women in Yemen. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/preventing-next-kabul-confronting-houthis-violent-suppression-women-yemen>

⁵ United Nations Population Fund. (2019, March 25). Women and Girls Continue to Pay Heavy Price in Yemen as Conflict Slips Further from Global View. <https://www.unfpa.org/press/women-and-girls-continue-pay-heavy-price-yemen-conflict-slips-further-global-view>

Consequently, the Yemen Socio-Economic Update for 2021 showed that poverty in Yemen tends to be classified as feminine, as the poverty rate among female-run households has reached 46% and has led to a 71% prevalence rate of anaemia among pregnant and lactating women. There are now at least ten million women and girls in need of humanitarian assistance.⁶

Because of the conflict, the average per capita GNP decreased from \$1,191 in 2014 to \$867 in 2020.⁷ This decrease coupled with a 180% devaluation of the local currency against foreign currencies during the same period, place additional economic pressure on women and their struggle to provide for their families. Women frequently have little or no experience with income-generating activities and face additional challenges as a result. With women more severely affected than men, an estimated 40% of households have lost their primary source of income as women have become the main carer for at least 11% of the total households, 21% of them under the age of 18.⁸ In internally displaced camps, over 40% of the families are headed by women, since many men have either died in the war or left their families.

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Women-led households in Yemen face significant challenges in making ends meet, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict and economic crisis. Many women in Yemen are responsible for supporting

⁶ ReliefWeb. (2021). Yemen Socio-Economic Update Issue 59 - April 2021 [EN/AR]. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-socio-economic-update-issue-59-april-2021-enar>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ World Bank. (2019). Yemen Country Engagement Note for the period FY20-FY21. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/757121557938303017/yemen-country-engagement-note-for-the-period-fy20-fy21>

their families financially but are often excluded from formal employment and face significant barriers to economic empowerment. In the absence of formal support, women-led households in Yemen rely on a variety of coping mechanisms to make ends meet. For example, many women in Yemen engage in informal work, such as selling goods in markets or working as domestic workers, to support their families. Increased engagement of

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Yemeni women in the informal economic sector also heightens risks to their safety and wellbeing, either physically through unsafe transportation, potential harassment by clients, or mentally because of the double burden of having to care for the children and generate income to make ends meet. Additionally, these low-income jobs provide little job security. Another source of income is through assistance from humanitarian organisations, which help many women-headed households in Yemen meet basic needs like food aid or cash transfers. Furthermore, families who lost their breadwinner are sometimes supported by other members of the community. In the light of higher poverty rates overall, however, social coping mechanisms at the community level are coming under great pressure.

Compared to an employment decrease of 11% since 2015 among men, female employment has decreased by 28% due to the conflict. Moreover, despite making up only 4% of all enterprises before the conflict, women-owned firms were more negatively impacted than male-owned ones.⁹ By 2015, 26% of enterprises in the commerce, service, and industrial sectors had closed, but this number increased to 42% among

⁹ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. (2021). Strengthening Institutions to Address Corruption in Yemen. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/7721>

businesses run by women, typically as a result of physical damage, loss of money, and shortages of fuel and power.

Although there are mechanisms for the economic empowerment of women in place, these are typically insufficient and unable to ensure familial stability due to the mounting pressures brought on by the current scenario since the start of the conflict and war. This is especially true when the socio-cultural context imposed by extremist regimes automatically disadvantages women.

To achieve genuine sustainable peace and prosperity in Yemen, it is imperative to invest in the economic empowerment of women by eliminating the restrictive conditions imposed on them by extremists who have curtailed their rights and participation. This necessitates investing in infrastructure efforts geared towards women's rapid integration into the workforce, including providing access to the internet, offering incentives for businesses to employ women, rolling out vocational and technical education programs, and launching community awareness campaigns to change social attitudes towards women's economic inclusion and potential contribution. These measures will enable women to participate fully in the workforce, improve their income generating skills, and contribute to the country's economic recovery and resilience.

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About the Author:

Nadia (@nadiasakkaf) is a renowned independent Yemeni researcher with expertise in media and digital safety, gender, democratic transitions, climate change and socio-economic development. She was the first woman appointed as Minister of Information and before that was Chief Editor of the country's first English language newspaper, The Yemen Times. She is co-founder of the Connecting Yemen initiative to advocate for accessible and affordable internet in Yemen, and she currently serves as the director of the 21 Century Forum, a UK based non-profit organisation connecting Europe and the Middle East.

Al-Sakkaf is a recipient of many international and local awards, she was also recognized by the BBC as one of 100 Women who changed the world, and one of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders in 2015. She has worked previously as the director of research of the economic think tank, Arabia Brain Trust. Nadia published extensively in the fields of politics, media, and development. She has written many policy and research papers, as well as book chapters, and has authored two books on Yemeni women's empowerment. She also published a book collection on the experiences of Yemeni women as electoral candidates available in Arabic and English. Her 2011 TED Talk "See Yemen through my eyes", is one of the most known videos on Yemen as it was translated into 34 languages and has over half a million views.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.