

“On the frontlines: The impact of the Yemeni conflict on the rights of women and children”

Statement for the UK Mission Roundtable

By Rasha Jarhum
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Greetings your excellencies,

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to brief you today on behalf of the Peace Track Initiative and the Women’s Solidarity Network, which includes more than 260 women inside and outside Yemen, from all social, economic, and political backgrounds coming together to fight for women’s rights and contribute to peacebuilding.

I am briefing you amid unprecedented uncertainty in my home country, Yemen, which, in addition to a devastating war, natural disasters, and the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, is now facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will focus my remarks on two key issues:

1. the impact of the conflict on Yemeni women, and how women’s organizations are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and
2. the ongoing barriers to women’s equal and meaningful participation in the peace process.

First: The impact of the conflict on Yemeni women, and how women’s organizations are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the war, although women already suffered from violence enabled by discriminatory laws and institutions, women had some measures of protection under tribal codes, which deemed it shameful to target women. Today, there is a total collapse of the protection system for women in Yemen.

The Houthis continue to arbitrarily detain women, including women human rights defenders, subjecting them to sexual abuse and torture and accusing them of engaging in sex work as a way to blackmail them and their families. In the last one month, Houthis targeted Taiz women’s prison, killing six women and two girls who were visiting their

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mothers and injuring many others. They also killed a woman in Baidha after she took arms to defend her home against an invasion of more than 30 armed Houthi men.

Women in government-controlled areas also face multiple challenges, including lack of access to basic services, threats by armed groups, confiscation of their lands and property, attacks on their organizations, death threats, and intimidation. Women survivors of violence are left by the government with no support, protection, or reparation.

However, Yemeni women are not passive victims and have demonstrated their strength and resilience despite these challenges. Amid attempts to undermine our rights and physical security, women led organizations are filling gaps in the provision of essential services and humanitarian assistance, facilitating negotiations over the release of detainees, the opening of humanitarian corridors, demilitarization of schools, and mediating armed conflicts over natural resources.

Women were the first to warn of an impending crisis and call for a ceasefire to focus efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, including trying to address basic needs, such as disbursing salaries and provision of clean water and electricity. Hospitals are not prepared to respond to COVID-19, and health care workers lack necessary protective gear and often go unpaid. Additionally, they lack supplies including medical equipment, fuel, and oxygen. For these reasons, people who are suspected of having COVID-19 have been rejected from hospitals. Our members started preparing early into this crisis by supporting clinics and hospitals with supplies, advocating for response measures to be taken by the state and local authorities, and raising awareness in their communities regarding the danger posed by COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the national parties, including the government, the Houthis, and the South Transitional Council (STC) - which recently declared self-rule over southern governorates - engage in a never-ending power struggle without prioritizing the rights and concerns of civilians.

This work by women led organizations is done with limited resources and funding as they face difficulties in accessing the UN pool of humanitarian funding that is too restrictive. Additionally, our members have reported that humanitarian aid has made its way into the black market or is being used by armed groups, instead of going to the intended communities. While some donors choose to cut aid for justifiable reasons, there is a need to reform humanitarian programs in Yemen and ensure that women-led organizations have accessibility to flexible and core funding.

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Moving on to my second point on Women's participation in the peace process:

Traditional model of peacemaking used in Yemen peace process, which limit participation to a two-party gun holders, reinforce and entrench patriarchal structures and inequality that lead to conflict in the first place, resulting in an outcome that only leads to more violence by encouraging marginalized groups to take up arms to see their demands met. It is as such vital to include peacemakers especially women, if we are to have a chance to achieve sustainable peace.

Civil society, including women's groups, continue to be excluded from the Track I peace process. Women were excluded in the Stockholm process, as only one woman in the government delegation participated. The Special Envoy tried to balance this through inviting nine women to advise on the process. However, these women advisers were on the sidelines and weren't able to access the decision-making and power-brokering spaces. Nor were women included in any follow-up committees formed as a result of the process. This created a truly missed opportunity. For example, the Mothers of Abductees Association were not involved in the Stockholm process; this group has been able to negotiate the release of more than 940 arbitrary detained persons while we have seen no progress through the UN-led process until date.

We decided to claim our space and not wait for an invitation to be included in any peace process. When Riyadh process took place, we were able to have a delegation of 16 women participate in the signing ceremony at the Riyadh process, and we saw ten of the articles of the agreement resonate with our recommendations, including those focusing on removal of military camps and anti-corruption mechanisms, however, no women were included in the national delegations and subsequently formed committees to follow on the implementation of the agreement.

Although we have led the calls for a ceasefire, we have been excluded from those discussions, and we have not seen the ceasefire plan shared recently by the Special Envoy with national parties. The lack of transparency and accountability in the current process is the reason why national parties are not compromising and providing concessions to agree on the implementation of a ceasefire.

There has been no shortage of international attention to the importance of ensuring women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in the peace process in Yemen. Many Security Council outcomes and specifically Resolution 2451 (2018) attest to that.

There is no shortage of political will of the national parties to include women. As the government has officially developed and adopted a National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security, which has a clear objective to include women in peace talks by no

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less than 30%. The Houthis are committed to the National Dialogue Outcomes, and their vision included objectives about the inclusion of women and youth. The South Transitional Council has also issued a statement committing to advancing Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

The only reason for excluding women now is the design and structure of the peace process by the UN Special Envoy. And it is time for him to hold national actors accountable for women's participation by firmly imposing a 50% quota leaving vacant seats in the delegations if women are not included.

To conclude, I urge you to consider the following recommendations:

1. Prioritize an inclusive, transparent, and accountable peace process that is based on multi-party participation, ensuring diverse representation of women, youth, and civil society of all political backgrounds from all regions of Yemen, including the South.
2. Demand the immediate release of arbitrarily detained persons, both women and men, including journalists, human rights defenders, politicians, academics, and Baha'is, to mitigate the threat they face from the COVID-19 pandemic in crowded prisons.
3. Urge the UN Special Envoy to be an *impartial* mediator rather than a *neutral* mediator and ensure he is holding parties accountable and publicly naming those who are derailing the peace process.
4. Support sustainable survivor-centered efforts to address both the short-term protection concerns and the long-term needs of survivors of violence, including women human rights defenders and peacemakers. Critical support includes fast track prioritization of the resettlement of Yemeni women human rights defenders and their families who remain under imminent threat.
5. Support a separate COVID-19 pandemic humanitarian appeal which prioritizes funding for local women-led organizations and call for reforms and accountability for the distribution of resources under the existing humanitarian appeal.
6. Support technical and financial commitments to implement the Yemen's National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security, ensuring participation of women-led organizations and taking into considerations their recommendations to improve the plan.

Thank you for your time.

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More reading:

- Women who dare dissent targeted for abuse by Yemen's rebels: <https://apnews.com/3a6fb8acdb8fb0b22f9c617a5aec20d>
- UPR Pre session joint report: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/WILPF_Yemen-Publication_web.pdf
- Yemeni detainees' plight and the political will for peace: <https://medium.com/@PeaceTrackInitiative/yemeni-detainees-plight-and-the-political-will-for-peace-57cd9fbc512a>
- Unfulfilled Ambition: Yemen's National Action Plan for Women Leaves Much to be Desired <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unfulfilled-ambition-yemens-national-action-plan-women-leaves-much-be-desired>
- Women Solidarity Network Letter to the current UN Envoy in the beginning of his mandate: <https://yemenwomenvoices.wordpress.com/>
- UNSC briefing 2019: <https://peacetrack.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/muna-lugman-uns-sc-statement-final-15-april-2019.pdf>
- UNSC briefing 2018: https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNSC%20statement%20Rasha%20Jarhum%20Nov16_clean.pdf
- The National Agenda for Women, Peace, and Security: <https://peacetrack.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/wps-national-agenda-en.pdf>
- Call for ceasefire and combating COVID-19 (Food for Humanity): https://www.change.org/p/united-nations-yemen-call-to-action-for-immediate-cess-fire-to-combat-covid-19?recruiter=953813255&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=share_petition
- Calls for ceasefire and combating COVID-19 (Women Solidarity Network): <https://www.facebook.com/WomenSolidarityYe/photos/a.1811458892260058/3599437756795487/?type=1&theater>
- Condemnation for continued military escalation post ceasefire calls: <https://www.facebook.com/WomenSolidarityYe/photos/a.1811458892260058/3634579659947963/?type=1&theater>

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